MAY THESE LEADEN BATTLEGROUNDS
LEAVE NO TRACE
Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs
III
KEI UEKAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY TEDDY
MECHANICAL DESIGN BY NAOHIRO WASHIO

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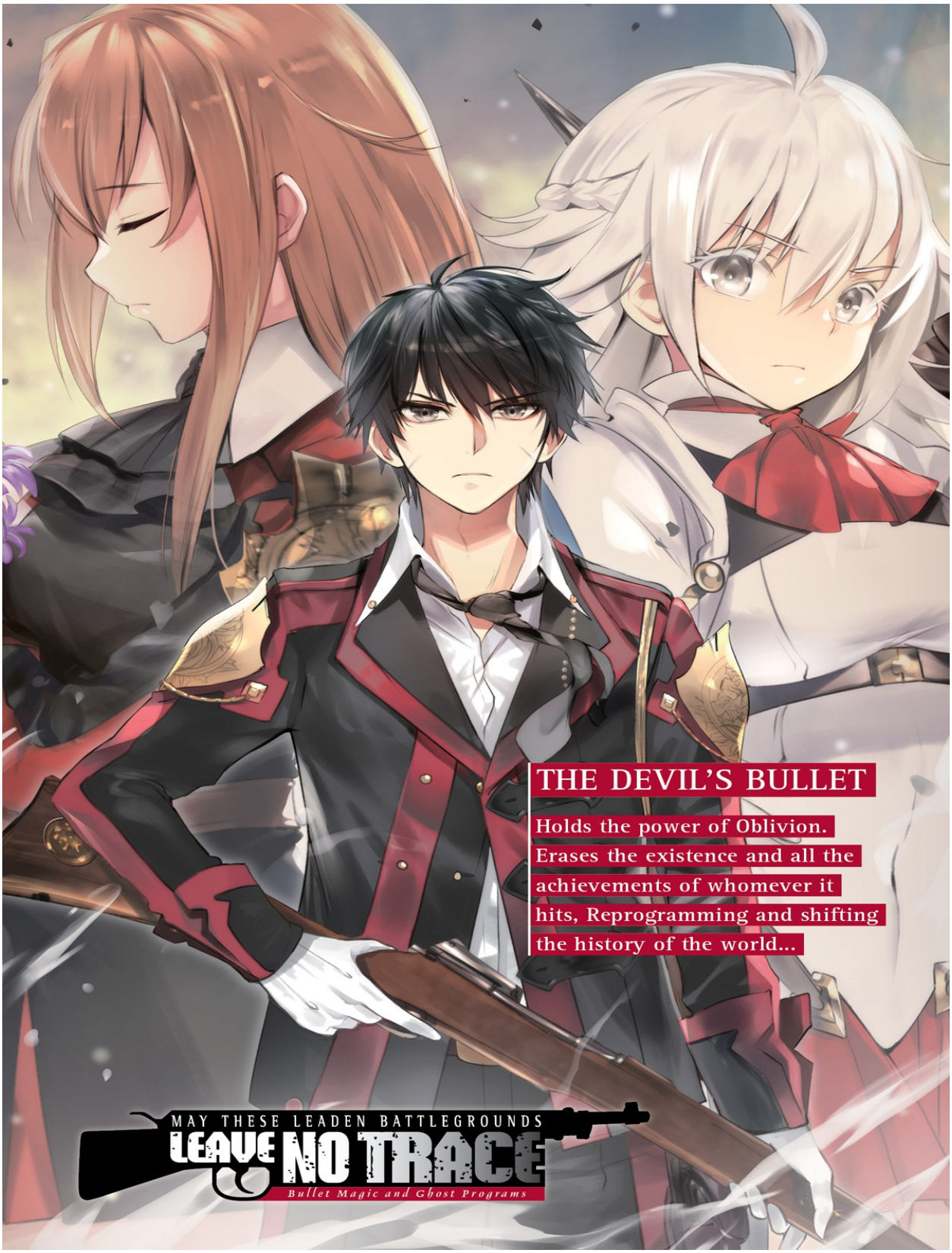
THE DEVIL'S BULLET
Holds the power of Oblivion.
Erases the existence and all the
achievements of whomever it
hits, Reprogramming and shifting
the history of the world...
MAY THESE LEADEN BATTLEGROUNDS
LEAVE NO TRACE
Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs

The bathroom door opened with a loud *clank*, and someone walked in. Apparently, another girl had the same idea as Athly, which was all well and good. However—

"Ugh!" Athly exclaimed unintentionally. The one who showed up was Air, the very person she'd been thinking about. And Air noticed it was already occupied only after walking in.

"Oh...," Air mumbled hesitantly, stopping in her tracks. She clearly hadn't expected anyone else to be there at that time of night. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to take a bath, just like you. Obviously..."

RAIN LANTZ
A young cadet from the East. Wields the Devil's Bullet in hopes of creating a world without war. Has the power of the Ema's divinity.
"Wh-why...?"
"Because it's mine. Do I need any other reason?"
The shock ran through the pistol, breaking the cylinder open and scattering...
...*silver* bullets.

MAY THESE LEADEN BATTLEGROUNDS

LEAVE NO TRACE

Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs

VOL. III

KEI UEKAWA

ILLUSTRATION BY
TEDDY

MECHANICAL DESIGN BY
NAOHIRO WASHIO

YEN ON
New York

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May These Leaden Battlegrounds Leave No Trace: Bullet Magic and Ghost Programs, Vol. 3
Kei Uekawa
Translation by Roman Lempert
Yen On edition edited by Maneesh Maganti & Yen Press Editorial
Cover art by TEDDY
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UCHI NUKARETA SENJOU HA, SOKO DE KIETEIRO Vol. 3
-DANGAN MAHO TO GHOST PROGRAM-
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First published in Japan in 2019 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
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First Yen On Edition: February 2021
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Uekawa, Kei, author. | TEDDY (Illustrator), artist. | Mishima, Kurone, 1991– artist. | Lempert, Roman, translator.
Title: May these leaden battlegrounds leave no trace / Kei Uekawa ; artists, TEDDY and Kurone Mishima ; translation by Roman Lempert.
Other titles: Uchinukareta senjō wa, soko de kieteiro. English
Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020005361 | ISBN 9781975310301 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975310325 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975320188 (v. 3 ; trade paperback)
Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.U27 May 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020005361
ISBNs: 978-1-9753-2018-8 (paperback)
978-1-9753-2019-5 (ebook)
E3-20210123-JV-NF-ORI

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Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Blazing fire lit the horizon. Intense flame dominated the battlefield as several dozen armored tanks stormed across the scorched surface. Not a single unit stood still, in part due to how even the battle seemed.

The East faced off against the West. Each side had several dozen Exelia units moving in formation and fighting on the uneven, rocky surface. Several minutes had passed since combat first broke out, yet none of the units had been lost.

The battle was far from one-sided, and neither of the two armies succeeded in curbing the other's numbers. The Akuro mountain region was dotted with flat areas that allowed Bullet Magic to travel with little disruption. The very fact that the battle hadn't been decided proved that both sides lacked a true trump card.

A mage's Qualia allowed them to evade a bullet moving even at supersonic speeds. No coincidence in the world was enough to let a stray bullet hit an experienced mage. And so, there was only one condition necessary to secure victory for one side—to create an insurmountable advantage for themselves. It was the only way to break this deadlock.

However, as the battle between the East and West raged on…

"What the hell is that?"

…*it* suddenly appeared.

"That unit, it's…"

A particular unit joined the fray, shattering the balance of the battle. It was jet-black, with armor unlike any ordinary Exelia.

Upon spotting the unusual appearance of that black unit, everyone froze. That dark-as-night shade wasn't the color of the special alloy used to mass-produced Exelia. It looked as if it had been dipped in ink to keep any light from reflecting off it, though its most striking feature was clearly its size. It stood twice as tall as a normal Exelia.

Everyone swallowed nervously at the sight of the massive, black Exelia. At a glance, one could tell it wasn't built to move quickly. Thus, it should and would have been at a disadvantage. Ordinary Exelias' powerful engines, coupled with their light frames, allowed them to move at high speeds, so a heavy Exelia could never move that quickly.

But the very next moment…

"Ah…!"

…that massive unit rushed forward, reaching incredible speeds in the blink of an eye. And using that momentum, it battered the East's Exelia division. It moved quickly, but not faster than a bullet. Its forward charge, a simple ramming attack with a clear trajectory, attempted to decimate them. Evading it should have been simple. But when the eastern units avoided its charge…

"It can't be!"

…the black unit swerved its massive frame, looped back in a perpendicular angle, and rammed itself against a few eastern Exelias that failed to react in time.

The air rumbled, and the battlefield itself shuddered under the impact. The units that had been struck burst into piles of crushed metal like rocks split by a hammer. The mages piloting them were reduced to mere red blots on the ground, losing all trace of their human form.

One hit, one simple ramming maneuver, had caused untold destruction. And with that, the eerie black unit that had just torn apart several armored tanks…

“Ah…!”

…changed its trajectory to hunt down a new target.

1. SECOND-GENERATION RAZOR-EDGE MODEL EXELIA

“This is data retrieved several days ago from a battle.”

The second-generation Exelia was a new unit loaded with a flow engine, which generated an output that placed it head and shoulders above existing models. But it was precisely because of that unique characteristic that they couldn’t be mass-produced. Thus, only a few were created for testing purposes.

Among those units was the Razor-Edge Model. And the footage they’d just seen made it clear just how powerful it was.

“The black unit you saw is one of the second-generation Exelia units, dubbed the Razor-Edge Model. There are several other second-generation models, but that one was the earliest manufactured unit. In fact, you could even consider it the prototype for all the rest. The flow engine was perfected alongside that unit.”

The flow engine was a piece of technology created in the eastern country of O’ltmenia by the nuclear physicist Kreis Falman. The cutting-edge technology took a great deal of the nation’s funds to develop, but a unit loaded with that very engine fell into the hands of their greatest enemy.

“Of the two units the West stole, this one has appeared in several battles. They’re likely gathering data through deployments, since they don’t understand the technology behind it.”

Kreis’s analysis seemed rational and calm, likely because she’d spearheaded its development. She observed the recording as mere data, then offered a detached, organized, and objective analysis on the performance of the unit she’d created. But one boy frowned as he listened to her words.

“……”

This cadet, Rain Lantz, had been called to Alestra Academy’s headmaster’s office, where Kreis had shown him footage of the Razor-Edge Model stampeding through the battlefield. And as he did, Rain’s fingers dug deep enough into his hand to draw blood.

The second-generation Exelia…

Rain quickly found himself lost in thought.

Two days ago, Rain Lantz had narrowly escaped death’s door and survived a fatal battle with the Ghost Deadrim. She’d arrived armed with her powerful Crystalline Bullet to steal the Turret-Model Exelia. The battle had concluded when the power of Oblivion struck down her partner, Isuna Cole.

Oblivion was the power to erase a person from existence, destroying them more completely than death ever could. The Devil's Bullet that Rain wielded erased every accomplishment and achievement of the person it struck, remaking the world into one untouched by their presence.

Reprogramming… The girl who'd produced the Devil's Bullet had used that term to describe the shift in the world. She'd entrusted the bullet to Rain and watched over his actions. And he'd used that bullet with wild abandon. Time after time, in as many battles as it took for the sake of his one true goal.

He wished to end the century-long conflict that had raged between the East and the West. To sever the cycle of destruction and tyranny. With that purpose, Rain used the Devil's Bullet to change the battlefield over and over, wiping his foes from the annals of history once and for all.

But he knew, of course. The power of that bullet was…

Literally, the power of the devil.

…something no human should have ever wielded. The power of Oblivion even wiped away its victims' deaths, inflicting an absolute erasure, an affront to life itself.

Such a power became an inescapable cross Rain had to carry. But he'd already resolved to carry that sin, to sully his hands with crimson blood as many times as it took, in order to end the war… To that end, he would fight on.

And so, a mere few days ago, Rain had erased a man from existence: a western officer by the name of Isuna Cole. Cole had been a factor in the creation of the Ghost Deadrim, and now they found themselves in a world where he had never even existed. Deadrim remained dead and likely had no means to resurrect.

With Deadrim's presence as a Ghost wiped away, the West should not have been able to steal the second-generation Exelia, so the East still had it as a trump card. Or so Rain had assumed…

Unfortunately, the situation in a world without Isuna greatly deviated from his expectations.

How'd the West get their hands on a second-generation Exelia?

"Hmm," a silver-haired girl mumbled, gazing at the footage. "That's an impressive rig."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"Given the little information we have, yeah, that's all I *can* say."

Three people occupied the room, Rain included. One of the other two was the academy's headmaster and developer of the second-generation Exelia, Kreis Falman. And the other had long, silver hair that shifted as she spoke.

"So what's this Razor-Edge Model?" the girl asked, pressing Kreis for information.

"Put simply, it's a heavy, sturdy unit."

"Hmm…"

“We basically went with the most primitive design concept imaginable, yes.”

The girl looked like an ordinary person, but nothing was further from the truth. She had died a century ago, but resurrected in a new body. She was the one mage capable of producing the Devil’s Bullet…the Ghost Air.

As Rain took in her face with a sidelong glance, he thought back to what had happened over the last few days.

Nothing about her looks out of the ordinary…

The Ghost Deadrim had now never been created, which resulted in two phenomena. The first was that the second-generation Exelia, and its superior performance, fell into the hands of the West. Put another way, technology that should have been exclusively in the hands of the East had leaked.

The second thing that happened was that this previously confidential technology seemed to be in wide use in the Reprogrammed world. It was a serious discrepancy.

The second-generation Exelia was exceedingly powerful, yes, but it carried far too many state secrets to roll out into live combat. If someone seized it during a battle, the technology it carried would be stolen. And so, they would only send it out to battle once mass production was within sight. But the situation had drastically changed in the newly Reprogrammed world.

In this world, the West had *successfully seized the unit*. And then they’d developed the second-generation Exelia faster than the East and sent it out into battle. Now they were already gathering information on its performance.

Two days ago, Rain had learned that fact. After shifting the world, those capable of recognizing the changes had to figure out what happened on their own. On realizing he needed more details, he consulted Air. The two of them then went to Kreis, who likely had the most intel on the circumstances currently surrounding the second-generation Exelia.

The explanation she’d offered them was this combat footage of the Razor-Edge Model.

“The Razor-Edge Model…”

They had twenty minutes worth of footage that had been retrieved from an eastern soldier’s combat recorder. The black-and-white screen constantly shook, and simply looking at it made Rain sick to his stomach. However, the footage did a good job of conveying the key details…like the Razor-Edge Model’s offensive capabilities.

“Let me tell you a bit about the Razor-Edge Model,” Kreis said.

Unlike Rain and Air, she didn’t possess the Devil’s Bullet and couldn’t tell that the world had shifted. In her mind, there was nothing unusual about the current state of affairs. But since she’d been friends with Air for forty years, Kreis divulged all the information she had when asked about the

current state of the world. And the main thing she talked about was the second-generation Exelia.

"The Razor-Edge Model's main strength is its sturdy and heavy frame," Kreis explained as she pointed at the footage of the machine ramming into its enemies and crushing them.

"I'm sure you can tell at a glance, but while normal Exelias are about thirteen feet long, the Razor-Edge Model is almost twice that size. It's also about twice as tall, so it weighs eight times as much as a normal Exelia," Kreis said, then spread out a few sheets of paper. They were detailed blueprints of the Razor-Edge Model, which she had drawn once upon a time.

A second later, Kreis pointed at a certain figure written over the blueprints and stated, "But in actuality, this unit is *fifty times* the weight of a normal Exelia."

"Fifty times…?"

"Roughly forty thousand pounds. Twenty tons."

Both Rain's and Air's expressions stiffened upon hearing the unbelievably large figure. The fact that it even gave Air pause proved just how absurd Kreis's words seemed.

Fifty times…

They'd expected it to be heavy, considering its size, but the weight Kreis mentioned exceeded their wildest imagination.

"It's the weight of a large freight-train car. Of course, an engine is normally never that heavy, but this is no ordinary vehicle. It's an Exelia, a tactical weapon designed to be as fast and maneuverable as possible through a combination of graimar-nuclear-alloy armor and a high-output engine. Under most circumstances, it'd never be this heavy."

To be ever lighter, ever faster. To dominate the battlefield with its diverse, precise movements. An Exelia aimed to go beyond the horizontal movement of a four-wheeled vehicle. Its creators had a single, simple concept in mind. They wished to create a machine capable of mimicking a living being's movements.

Humans and other animals controlled their weight by bending and expanding their multi-jointed limbs. An ordinary tank, by comparison, couldn't jump or suddenly change its course. Only the strong-yet-soft structure of a living being's limbs had the ability to manage that kind of mobility.

And so, Exelias were built with four legs, fashioned after the limbs of a quadruped but with rotating wheels at their edges. However, in order to allow for precise movement, the fuselage had to be as light as possible. The greater the weight, the stronger the inertia during movement, making it harder to brake. So if the aim was for Exelias to move in more complex ways, the fuselage needed to be lighter and easier to control.

To that end, mages replaced turrets, which weighed several hundred pounds. And Bullet Magic developed in tandem with Exelias.

However, the Razor-Edge Model had rendered the premise itself obsolete, making how much weight the first-generation Exelia cast off its primary focus.

“How can it be so fast if it’s that heavy?” Air asked the obvious question.

“We have the flow engine’s massive supply of energy to thank for that. It has an output that puts any other engine to shame, so even with fifty times the weight, it can move just as quickly… No, it’s even faster than a standard Exelia.”

“Mmm.” Air nodded and turned her eyes back to the footage just as it showed the Razor-Edge Model crash into older Exelias. “So it uses its weight to crush other units, huh?”

The Razor-Edge Model’s main tactic seemed simple. It rammed its opponents. That was all.

“Even older Exelias have very sturdy armor. Bullets and anti-materiel shells can’t pierce it. However, the impact of the Razor-Edge Model’s massive weight can topple them.”

An Exelia’s armor was thick enough to deflect bullets. But when something fifty times its weight crashed into it at high speed, the connection of its legs to its fuselage failed under the strain. That also explained why Bullet Magic could destroy Exelias. They couldn’t tolerate localized explosions over their structural weaknesses.

“During its initial development stages, it was a trial unit meant to test how much strain the flow engine could handle before suffering a drop in performance. We never intended it to be a battering ram, but when we added weight by placing armor on its joints, it gained the ability to crush an Exelia. Essentially, it became an anti-Exelia armored combat vehicle.”

The footage came to an end right as Kreis concluded her explanation. Six eastern units blew up, and the footage cut off as the one filming it started to retreat.

After Kreis’s report, Rain left the Alestra Academy headmaster’s office. The meeting took place during lecture time, so there wasn’t a single student outside the classroom aside for Rain. As Rain walked through the silent corridor, he tried to put all the information he’d gathered so far into order.

Two days ago… Rain had used the Devil’s Bullet on Isuna. One man had disappeared; then the world had shifted. In doing so, Rain thought he’d protected the second-generation Exelia’s secrets, but he instead found himself faced with the opposite result.

The Razor-Edge Model…

The technology had fallen into western hands. Apparently, it had been stolen three months ago. The Razor-Edge Model had been stored in a satellite base, where it underwent tests. While it was in operation, the West sent out a raiding party and pillaged the two units stored in the base.

Of course, none of that had happened in the world before the Reprogramming. It had only happened in the new world.

What caused this?

The West's first attempted theft should have only happened a few days ago, during the raid launched by Deadrim… Rain recalled that skirmish in the snowy field, when he and Air had defended the second-generation Turret-Model Exelia.

That clearly seemed like their first operation to steal a second-generation Exelia. But for some reason, that changed with the erasure of the Ghost Deadrim and Lieutenant Isuna Cole.

But why, how…?

Something that shouldn't have happened suddenly became reality. One person's disappearance had led to a totally new situation. Rain had seen accomplishments vanish from history plenty of times. He'd wielded that power in battle because he thought that was all it did. And yet, the opposite had happened. This time, the loss had produced something new.

"Someone else stole the second-generation Exelia in Deadrim's place."

Rain turned around, startled, and spotted a girl with silver hair. She was far too short to be a soldier…

"Don't sneak up on me like that…"

"It's your fault you zoned out and failed to notice me," the girl reprimanded him for letting his guard down.

"Well, whatever. Let's get back to the topic at hand," Air said as she walked beside him.

Their height difference appeared even clearer when she moved next to him. Air stood two heads shorter than Rain. But despite that, she remained a mage of the highest order, the kind Rain couldn't hope to match even with years of experience—a Ghost.

"Understanding what happened is easy enough."

And on top of all that, she was exceptionally perceptive. She'd already gleaned the answer to the questions Rain was mulling over.

"Deadrim led the team tasked with stealing second-generation Exelia technology. But with her gone, someone else pulled it off earlier. Simple, isn't it?"

"I guess, but…," Rain muttered and trailed off. Air's logic seemed sound. Deadrim was out of the picture, so someone else had pulled it off in her place. But…

"Who did it?"

…somehow, the operation that should have happened a few days ago shifted back to three months prior to the Reprogramming.

Stealing the unit was no simple task. A person had to infiltrate another country's territory and fight without any reinforcements or support. And after winning, despite the stacked odds, they still needed to escape with the stolen unit. It seemed exceedingly difficult to complete unless one was a Ghost, a being capable of superhuman feats. And yet, it had happened all the same.

Under normal circumstances, the change would have appeared to be a sequence of tangled, unrelated events. Rain and Air would have simply

ignored the question despite their doubts. But their battle with Deadrim had yielded a critical clue…

“Who did it instead of Deadrim, eh?” Air whispered. “Only one option comes to mind.”

They’d learned his name through their battle with Deadrim—he was their only clue, and the only possibility.

“The person who stole the Exelia doesn’t matter. Instead, we should focus on the man who planned the operation. And I’d bet it’s the same person who gave Deadrim her orders,” Air said, summing up her conjecture. “I’m talking about Kaisei Reisman. He was behind Deadrim, and he probably had a hand in stealing the second-generation Exelia. That’s the only coherent explanation.”

Kaisei Reisman… Rain kept thinking about that name as he walked forward. He didn’t know the man’s face or voice, but he couldn’t get him out of his mind.

……

Rain had learned his name at the end of their battle with Deadrim, when her body was damaged and her insides were exposed. Within her remains, they found a pact bullet. And the name of the person who controlled Deadrim, Kaisei, was etched upon it.

That meant one thing… Deadrim was manipulated by the owner of that bullet, by Kaisei.

Perhaps they’d been overthinking the information they were lucky enough to gain. But learning about a person capable of manipulating a Ghost produced theories they couldn’t easily ignore.

For example, what if he didn’t just manipulate Ghosts? What if that man *created* them?

In that case, he’s… Rain’s thoughts wandered, and his expression turned grim.

“Anyway,” said Air, walking beside him. “We don’t have enough information right now, so we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. Keeping every possibility in mind is important, sure, but the changes the Devil’s Bullet produces are complicated. We’ll never run out of questions if we keep mulling over it. So we have to gain clear, certain information.”

“How?”

“By meeting Kaisei.”

“……”

“I know, he’s an enemy officer. And that means we’ll have to catch him and beat the stuffing out of him until he talks.”

“…Right.”

Air’s voice sounded thick with malice. She seemed incapable of holding back her emotions in this case, and Rain could almost see the steam rising from her head. Her anger was understandable, however. Air was a Ghost, a soul forced to rise and fight after death. And she’d learned that another Ghost like her was manipulated by that man.

That wasn't to say she felt some kind of camaraderie. If anything, other Ghosts were enemies Air had to kill. But even so, the Ghost of black they met on that snowy mountain felt special.

…Even Air gets angry sometimes, huh? Seeing that part of Air didn't overwhelm Rain, though. Honestly, it was something of a relief, because he rarely saw her get emotional.

When they first met a few months ago, Air felt to Rain like a mysterious, inhuman presence. She was a girl of transcendent skill and knowledge, as well as the mage who created the Devil's Bullet, a power that bent the rules of reality.

Frankly, Rain almost felt she was from another world entirely, looking down at him and manipulating him freely. She always seemed to sneer at him disparagingly and act so high and mighty. But lately, while she still apparently took pleasure in Rain's flustered confusion, she treated him more like an equal. And that honestly made Rain feel happy.

Maybe we're finally getting closer… There were still parts of each other that both of them couldn't intrude on, but little by little…they'd opened up. That was how he felt.

"What's happened over there?" Air raised her voice in a quizzical tone.

As they walked through the external corridor connecting the headmaster's office to the lecture wing, they encountered a large group of students crowding around the bulletin board. There were about a hundred, all looking at some posting. Except…

"Hmm…"

"What's wrong?"

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Yeah, you would, wouldn't you?"

Most news within Alestra Academy, with the exception of orders directed at individual cadets, was posted on that bulletin board. And Rain couldn't recall a single time that news on it hadn't caused him grief.

"Despite appearances, you're a major problem child, aren't you?"

"Shut up."

"What trouble did you get into this time?" Air snickered.

…I take that back. I don't want to get close to someone this evil.

Honestly, the posting interested him. The fact that it was up for all to see implied it was a message directed to the entire student body. And so, considering past experiences, Rain couldn't help but be curious. He wanted to check right away, but the large crowd surrounding the board blocked all paths toward it, making it inaccessible.

"If someone's going to get mad at you again, maybe I should join you?"

Air spoke playfully, having found a reason to tease him, while Rain squatted near that petite girl's legs…

"This time, Kreis should— Waaah?!"

"Up we go."

…put his head right below her, and rose up, lifting her in the process.

“Wh-what…?!” Air babbled. Rain had, simply put, given her a ride on his shoulders.

“Can you see it?”

“See what?!”

“Isn’t it obvious…?” Rain mumbled as he pointed toward the audience. He clearly meant the bulletin board. As short as she was, sitting on Rain’s shoulders should have let her see the document plastered on the bulletin board with her keen eyesight.

“M-my…”

“What?”

“M-my legs…” Air mumbled something, but it didn’t seem related to the posting.

Rain looked up in confusion, only to realize his mistake and exclaim, “… Ah!”

Air stared at him, face red as an apple.

“Hey, Air, what’s wr—?” Rain moved his head as he questioned her, and when the back of his neck rubbed against her crotch…

“Ack!”

…Air’s legs suddenly tightened around his neck.

“Ugh!”

“Y-you…” She paused there, took a deep breath, then continued. “You idiooooooot!”

Pow! Air’s fist bashed the top of Rain’s head.

“Ouch!”

“I swear, how do you pull something like this out of nowhere?! I can’t believe you…!” Air screamed, thrashing about and raining blows on Rain’s head with both hands while Rain held both of her legs tight to keep her from falling.

“Why the sudden outburst?! What’s gotten into you?!”

“This isn’t ‘sudden,’ you blockhead!”

“What does the posting say?”

“Who cares?! The way you’re holding me is the real problem, you moron!”

“Hey, wait!”

Right after she said that, Air finally managed to slither away from Rain, who’d held her legs as tightly as he would grab his worst nemesis, thereby inadvertently rubbing his neck against her inner thighs. She landed on the floor and bolted away from him, running in the direction of the lecture ward like a startled rabbit.

She clearly ran away in a manner similar to someone afraid of a stray dog, but…

“Doesn’t she want to know what the posting says?”

…Rain waited a full five minutes. Of course, Air never returned.

The posting on the bulletin board was about a collective deployment order. Several dozen third-year students and upperclassmen, including Rain, had to head to the Lakuta ruins region in five days. It was a formerly urban area that had become uninhabitable due to repeated battles.

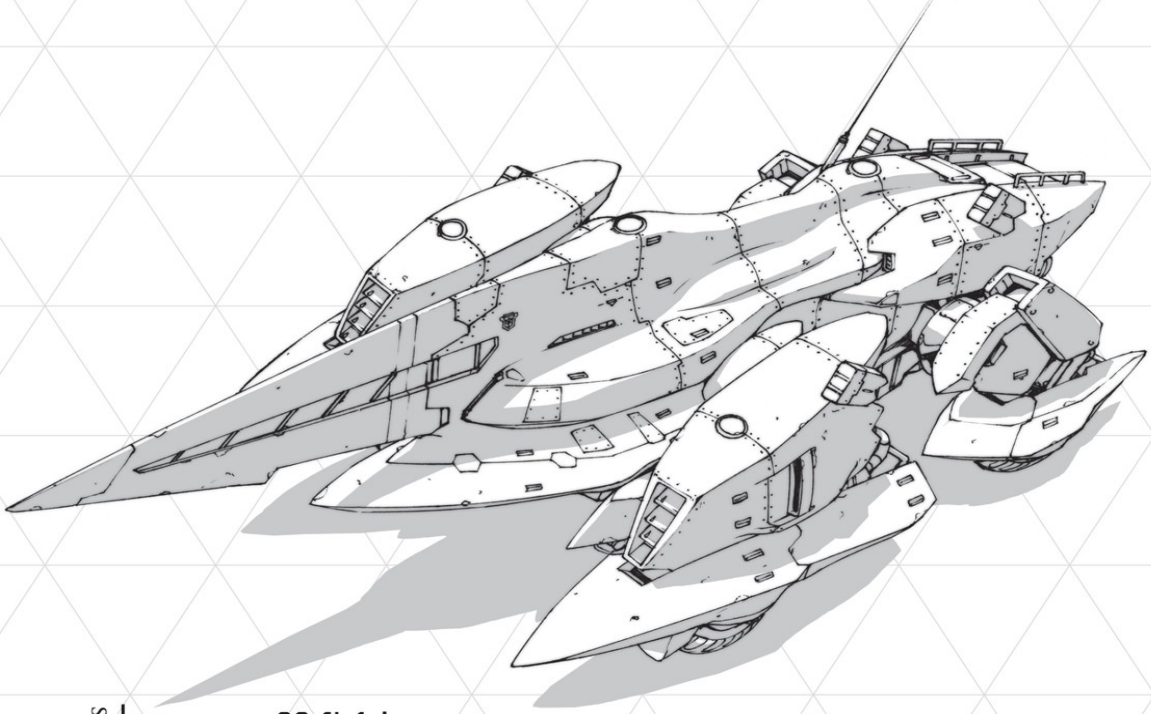
MECHANICAL DESIGN:
NAOHIRO WASHIO

EXELIA 2ND GEN—α-1

EXELIA OF THE WESTERN COUNTRY OF HARBORANT

[SECOND-GENERATION RAZOR-EDGE MODEL EXELIA α-1]

An Exelia designed to be both bulky and sturdy. The thick, durable armor it possesses can withstand nearly any impact. While its frame is exceptionally heavy by Exelia standards, efficient use of the vast swathes of energy produced by the flow engine allows it to have both speed and mobility. Its main form of attack is a simple ramming maneuver. Most Exelias are designed with team combat in mind, but this is the first one created for solo operations. That being said, its specs make operating it exceedingly difficult, and most ordinary manipulators will pass out within moments of trying. Only a limited number of ace pilots can draw out this unit's maximum potential.



SPECIFICATIONS

Total height:	**29 ft 1 in**
Total length:	**13 ft 77 in** (fuselage only)
Full width:	**18 ft 9 in**
Dry weight:	**21.6 tons**
Engine:	metal-cooled horizontally opposed two-cylinder graimar nuclear alloy pulse-type flow engine with 1,680 ps

2. ATHLY’S BATTLE

Whenever she slept, that scene haunted her in her dreams. There was incandescent heat. Countless bullets whizzed through the air like flashes of light. Flame rained down on the familiar townscape, on the area where she’d made her first friend, on the school she’d attended as a child, on the streets she’d often shopped in… They were all dyed crimson, consumed by the flames.

The people fled, but rampaging Exelias violently blocked their avenues of escape, mercilessly sealing their fates.

It was a massacre. Helpless citizens without the means to fight back were slaughtered, one by one. The western soldiers who led the assault burned the fleeing citizens like they were on some kind of hellish assembly line.

After a long while, she crossed the street lined with thousands of corpses. And then…

Aaah…

…the last thing she saw…

No…

…was the sight of her parents, who she’d left behind in this town. They were both mages, so they had their own weapons and at least some power to resist. And so, they took the rifle they kept in their house for decoration and charged the armored tank.

Don’t…!

It came without any warning. A single blast of Bullet Magic landed right in front of them like a stray bullet, producing an intense flurry of crimson fire. Their bodies instantly burned as if they were made of dry straw, and they died before they even had a chance to scream. Reduced to ashes within seconds.

The *crimson* girl who’d fired that bullet stood at the back of the scene.

Ah…!

Her hair resembled blood…and her eyes were a mysterious black-on-red hue.

She woke up with a start, cold sweat on her skin. At some point, she’d dozed off while sitting and apparently had a dream. Looking around, she confirmed she was somewhere safe… No flames were consuming everything. But her heart kept beating with the intensity of an alarm bell.

What a terrible dream… No matter how much she tried to forget it, she couldn't. The few times she managed to sleep, that scene replayed in her mind.

It was the day she'd lost everything. She remembered her parents burning to nothing…and that crimson girl who stuck to her memory and refused to leave…

"Athly."

"Ah!" Athly yelped and jolted up. The voice had simply spoken to her, but the vestiges of the dream left her feeling jumpy.

"Wh-what?!"

"…What do you mean 'what'?" the boy replied, taken aback by her surprise. "They said we're almost there, so you should get ready."

The boy was one she knew well. He had faint black hair, an average build for a cadet his age, and nothing distinctive about him except that he had a rifle strapped to his back.

The cadets were being ferried to their destination in a transport vehicle. Several dozen people were packed in the car like sardines. However, the boy sitting before her, who was once her partner, had simply watched over her silently before she jerked awake.

"……" Athly forced herself to wake up, then called his name: "Rain."

After that, she grabbed hold of her own rifle once more.

"Let's make it through today unharmed, okay?"

The Lakuta ruins region was once a flourishing industrial iron mining and processing city. But the East and West warred over the mine in the area, and the town suffered. Many citizens fled in search of a safer place to live.

Over 90 percent of the town's population left their houses and belongings behind, so it soon lost all its municipal functions. Lakuta was then designated a deserted region and left under the military's jurisdiction.

Five years had passed since then. The townscape was left largely unmaintained, and the area was visibly weathered as a result. Most of the residential buildings were windswept, leaving their outer walls cracked. The roads were unmaintained and riddled with protuberances that made them uneven, making it difficult for a normal vehicle to drive through. It was, for all intents and purposes, a ghost town.

"Oh, there are some people around."

Still, although over 90 percent of the populace had left Lakuta behind, it remained a town for the refugees.

"I can't believe people are living here."

"I guess it's not completely unlivable, if you ignore the war."

"How do they get stuff like electricity and water, though?"

"I hear they manage by using a few lines that still work."

In the few miles they walked into town, they spotted several residents. And they didn't look like neglected vagrants, either. The people seemingly maintained at least some standard of living. From what Athly had heard, a

human could survive as long as they had access to a fresh water supply. And so, as long as they could adjust to the low standard of living, they didn't need to leave their homes behind.

Athly understood them, but it still made no sense to her that they chose to live in a war zone. The two sides had fought over the iron mine, which had been seized by Harborant three years ago.

Unlike the rarer, far more unique graimar nuclear alloy, iron was quite common. But the mine in Lakuta yielded several times the ore others did, making it important territory. And that was why Athly, Rain, and the rest were sent there.

"A suppression battle…?"

"Yeah. We're launching a surprise attack that doubles as a blitz. We're going on the offensive, despite being on the back foot overall."

For once, they weren't going to be on the receiving end of an attack. The East planned to initiate a battle to retake the stolen iron mine. And in so doing, they would regain the precious natural resources required to continue their war effort.

Rain, Athly, and the other cadets would serve as the rearguard of this battle. Meanwhile, the central part of the battle would take place directly near the mine.

Athly Magmet's life had always been touched by war, but it had become terribly gruesome in recent years. That said, her parents had both been soldiers, and she was greatly influenced by them and the many relatives she had who were also military personnel. So, in her eyes, people dying in the line of duty was natural.

Still, every time it happened, unspeakable grief tormented her. Each time, another scar was etched into her heart. No matter how many times she experienced that pain, the blow never softened. The thought of them drowning in despair, of never seeing them again, filled her heart and body with pain that defied description. And yet, she didn't flee from battle. Quite the opposite, in fact. A righteous flame burned within her chest…

Yes…

Several people had died around her, and each time, she felt it vividly. Thanks to the irrational, fickle nature of the world, good and evil didn't separate life from death. Only strength mattered.

The weak died. That was all there was to it. And once she knew that, Athly had started to hate feeling powerless. That feeling hadn't changed since the first time she'd experienced it at the age of ten. In order to suppress it, she'd found her way to Alestra Academy and jumped at the chance to become a soldier. But that long-held emotion began to waver at last.

I…

There was a distinct reason for that. A series of shocking events had taken place several months ago. That hellish, burning scene still haunted her dreams. The West had invaded the town she was born and raised in,

Leminus. And the battle that took place there had claimed the lives of the people she wanted to protect most, her parents.

Back then, Athly had seen her—the one who set fire to her home and killed her parents…

Kirlilith…

She was an uncanny presence, a crimson existence. Something about her seemed fundamentally removed from the rest of the world. And she stole everything from Athly: the town she lived in, the peace around her, the parents she loved…

Bitter resentment filled her heart. She began to hate the world itself. But a few days later, maddened as she was with grief and confusion, she chose to step onto the battlefield with a broken heart. And there, the whims of fate changed Athly's future.

During a battle over a mine, in an urban area where the East and West clashed, she accidentally laid her hands upon *it*.

In the end, this is… Athly looked around to confirm no one was looking, then pulled out a single bullet casing hidden in her breast pocket. The bullet itself had long since disappeared, but the shell looked different from an ordinary bullet's in a few ways.

It was silver in color. It shone as if covered in foil, unlike other bullets. However, its coloring wasn't the only odd thing about it.

I…

The most striking, startling aspect was the name etched onto it.

What do I do…?

Kirlilith Lambert.

The name of the woman who had reduced both her hometown and her parents to ashes was etched on the silver bullet. It had appeared after Athly shot her…

…Enough. I have to stop thinking about this! Athly shook her head, refusing to let thoughts of the bullet dominate her mind. The moment she killed that girl flashed through her memory.

Rolling flames had surrounded her as Kirlilith appeared before her, already deathly wounded. Faced with her parents' killer, Athly had been overcome by bloodlust and fired a bullet. In fact, it was the first time she'd ever shot another person.

Forget about it. For now, at least… She forcibly pushed the image from her mind. No…she had to banish it because the battle was about to begin.

Thirty minutes ago, the East had launched a surprise attack on a satellite base located near the mine. They then expanded the front by sending in waves of soldiers like a tsunami, flooding Lakuta with armored weapons.

The cadets were ordered to remain on high alert aboard their Exelias. Athly may have had the leisure to ponder the silver bullet, but that was only thanks to luck, since they had to be ready to fight at a moment's notice. Of

course, because they were the rearguard, they only ran the risk of getting involved in the battle if it turned in the West's favor. And that wasn't likely.

Still, they were on a battlefield, so there was no telling what might happen. And so, Athly really had to focus on the events unfolding before her eyes instead of wandering off into thoughts about unrelated events.

However, right when that thought crossed her mind…

Huh…? Athly looked around calmly and realized something. The classmate who often paired with her was nowhere to be found.

Rain…

She couldn't find her former partner's unit. The cadets' units had formed a circle to better observe the area, but Rain's Exelia wasn't among them.

He'd been paired with the transfer student, Air, for the operation, and she'd seen the two of them sitting on the same unit earlier. But the cadets were ordered to remain on standby and weren't permitted to move from their position in the middle of the operation. So what had happened to them?

Where did they go?

Athly looked around one more time, but…

Ah…!

…the view before her soon distorted.

This feeling…!

Reality seemed to bend. And yet, she knew the sensation wasn't something conjured by her mind, since she'd experienced it before.

Not again…!

Athly didn't even get the chance to grasp the situation. The scene before her eyes distorted and bent. And then…the world shifted.

Ugh…

An odd sensation washed over Athly for a few seconds. But eventually, the distortion died down. After that, Athly looked around and…

Huh…?

…realized she no longer stood in the same spot she had a few seconds ago.

A burning forest filled Athly's field of vision.

"What…?" Athly questioned reality, failing to grasp what had happened. After the odd sensation overtook her, the scene before her also changed.

"This is…"

She was surrounded by trees, while Bullet Magic was quickly whittling them down. It was the cold season, but the swirling flames filled the area with smoldering heat. This was a battlefield…the front lines. She no longer stood at the rear.

The Exelia she was in was a different model from before, though. And one other factor greatly differed from her previous situation.

"Athly," a voice called out from behind, from the gunner's seat. She'd been paired with someone she didn't usually work with for the mission. He

was an intellectual, mature classmate named Bearis. But this wasn't his voice.

"Rain…"

"Um, I know this sounds strange, but I've gotta ask you something."

The black-haired boy who never let his guard down on the battlefield…

"Where are we again?"

…suddenly asked where they were.

An hour earlier, right when the battle over Lakuta began…

The East had begun its final preparations. They'd deployed five platoons, four of which consisted of five Exelias, while the remaining one contained sniping and intelligence experts. A total of roughly twenty Exelias and over two hundred combatants on foot were set to penetrate the West's defensive lines and suppress the area with overwhelming firepower.

The cadets weren't counted among their ranks, since they served as reserve members. They would only be called in if there was a need to make one final push to secure victory…or if the operation failed and the East needed to retreat.

Still, even with that in mind, one duo among them had no intention of sitting on their hands: Air and Rain.

"There's only one thing we need to keep in mind this time," Air said.

The two of them sat in their Exelia, which was an armored weapon in its own right, even if it was only equipped for cadet use.

"And that is…?"

"The enemy's on the defensive this time," Air said as she looked in the direction of the mine.

They were situated directly north of the Lakuta ruins region, meaning the mine was even farther north.

"Our side's usually on the back foot, but that's not the case here, which makes the Devil's Bullet that much harder to use. We'll have to be extra careful."

The Devil's Bullet could erase people from existence. Shooting someone who initiated a battle would make it so the battle never began. Killing an officer who made great strides in that battle could overturn the damage they caused.

Thus far, the East had only acted to defend themselves, so Rain had managed to use the Devil's Bullet to turn unfortunate results on their heads. But this time, things were different. The East was the aggressor in this battle. In other words, their enemies hadn't done anything yet.

"Though, once the battle begins, I assume some people in the West will employ some interesting tactics," Air continued. "To begin with, the West will have to react to our side as they defend, which they aren't used to. Rather than attack, they'll probably focus on holding the line."

A defensive battle was fought differently. There was no line to attack the enemy, since the objective wasn't to win, but to "not lose." To that end,

standard tactics were somewhat predictable…and commanders couldn't showcase their true skills in such a monotonous exchange.

Unlike in offensive battles, where a wide range of tactics was put to the test, erasing an acting commander wouldn't change much. Their replacement would likely act in the same manner, after all.

The Devil's Bullet could erase people, but the world corrected things accordingly. Erasing one skilled commander simply paved the way for someone else to take their place. That was why even the Devil's Bullet couldn't truly change an unfavorable battle.

"I want you to decide how we fight, Rain," Air told him.

The battle for the Lakuta ruins region was about to begin. If the East lost, they'd be in an even worse position than before. And in that tense situation, Air entrusted the choice to Rain's judgment.

"How we handle this situation is entirely up to you."

"……"

Air insisted that the choice remained fundamentally with Rain. She shared his objective, planned to help him if needed, and was willing to offer advice, but she decided to step back from the situation and stay there from start to finish.

Rain couldn't understand what she was thinking. And yet, he knew her decision likely wasn't a mistake. Air had challenged other Ghosts to battle multiple times, but not once did things end up how she wanted. Even when she tried her best and made all the right choices, it always ended in tragedy. That was why she'd decided not to move of her own volition, whether Rain's judgment seemed good or bad. That hadn't changed since the moment she'd entrusted him with the Devil's Bullet. Air had decided to be an observer and nothing more.

After thinking it over for a second, Rain made his choice.

"…This time, we'll stay in the rear."

"Oh?"

"I mean, I know we can't guarantee the East will win, but we're in an objectively advantageous position."

Rain understood the East had the chance to strike an overwhelming blow so long as he used the power to erase people wisely. But he also knew from experience that it was a bad idea to use the Devil's Bullet frivolously. Its effects were simply too complicated to properly predict their results. And taking the risk seemed silly given the situation.

Erasing Isuna after Deadrim had tried to seize the second-generation Exelia had only resulted in the West getting their hands on it—the unsettling reality they found themselves in now was proof of that. Rain couldn't use the Devil's Bullet recklessly.

"For now, we'll wait and see," Rain said. "There's no one from the West we absolutely need to erase in this battle. Any one of their commanders can hold the line effectively, so erasing one of them won't change anything."

“Well, the one thing we want to avoid is screwing up and turning the tables.”

“Yeah. I agree.”

They decided to remain in place. At least, for the moment.

As Rain finished speaking, a flare echoed in the distance. The East’s armored units had made contact with the enemy and entered combat. Both countries’ main forces clashed, embroiling the Lakuta ruins region in conflict.

Rain watched over the ensuing battle from the rear. True to his word, he stayed put, keeping an eye out as events unfolded. The fact that he possessed the Devil’s Bullet was a secret few knew. In the eyes of every other soldier, Rain was a mere cadet of little importance. His only duty was to guard their rear flank.

The cadets remained motionless, only receiving information through scheduled transmissions. They waited with bated breath, praying for victory.

I have a bad feeling about this… Unfortunately, a premonition of disaster struck Rain, who could do nothing but hold his ground and wait.

Fifty minutes later…

“We have currently suffered zero casualties. Cadets are to remain on standby.”

They’d received their fifth scheduled report. The transmission was brief.

“Wow…,” Air uttered as she listened to the transmission from the manipulator’s seat. “It seems this country can get results when it puts its mind to it. Maybe they pulled it off by using weapons other than Exelias? Not that I care.”

“Well, you should! It’s not like this doesn’t concern us.”

“Looks like we won’t have to interfere today.”

Fifty minutes had passed since the battle began, and the East had broken through the West’s defenses and breached their lines. In a defensive battle, that initial breakthrough was crucial. Their success meant only one thing.

“I guess we won.”

The surprise attack had worked. Their chances of success were predicted at over 70 percent, so it wasn’t an unexpected outcome, but Rain still sighed in relief. The sounds of the bombardment in the distance gradually died down. The enemy forces decreased, and the engagements between Exelias also lessened alongside them.

However, some units still fought back. They were too far for him to see, and there were enough obstacles to hide them from sight, but Rain used his rifle’s scope as a makeshift telescope to keep track of things. They were well outside of his firing range, but by focusing as much as he could, he at least got a lay of the land.

It was a mere whim. He knew they were about to win, so he decided to take a casual glance around. But when Rain focused on the front lines, he saw something shocking.

"That's…"

"What's wrong?" Air asked him.

No way… It can't be! Why?!

A lone shadow lingered at the edge of his vision, rushing through the western side of the ruins. The black machine was so tall he could tell how massive it was even through the scope. It was also fifty times heavier than any ordinary Exelia, but its speed seemed to completely ignore that fact.

This was Rain's first time seeing it directly, and it was well over a thousand feet away at that, but…he could never mistake it for anything else. He'd heard of it a few days ago and had seen footage of it in action.

The Razor-Edge Model's main strength is its sturdy and heavy frame.

A second-generation Exelia had appeared on the battlefield, and it was an evolved combat tank that boasted specs far beyond any older models.

The Razor-Edge Model…!

"Air!" Rain shouted.

"Yeah?!" Air replied. She probably heard the urgency in his voice, since her listless expression disappeared immediately.

"What happened?"

"The Razor-Edge Model just showed up," he told her.

"What?!" she cried. "You mean the one we—?"

"Yeah, the same one Kreis showed us footage of the other day."

The Razor-Edge Model was a second-generation Exelia that boasted overwhelming offense and defense. If it acted anything like in the footage, it had the ability to single-handedly decimate the East's forces.

This is bad…!

Shivers ran down Rain's spine. They didn't have time to think of countermeasures, so it had free rein to stampede through the battlefield and destroy the East's advantageous position. Thus far, the East hadn't lost any units; their armored force had destroyed six enemy machines without any casualties. But the Razor-Edge Model barreled toward them…

Ah…!

…and crushed two eastern Exelias in an instant. As soon as they noticed its approach, the troops fired Bullet Magic at it and even hit their mark, but it failed to penetrate the Razor-Edge Model's armor or deal any damage at all. The second-generation Exelia's thick defenses rendered the magic powerless.

Unlike an ordinary unit, its manipulator seat was also heavily armored, so sniping the manipulator was out of the question. In order to destroy that unit, they needed to destroy the Exelia altogether.

Rain remained frozen as another unit was crushed mercilessly beneath the giant metallic menace. Even from afar, he heard the rumblings of the

massive explosion as mechanical bits scattered about. The enemy had somehow snatched victory from the jaws of defeat.

“Air!”

“I’m on it!”

As soon as Rain said the word, their unit sped away from the rearguard. Air had previously placed them in a blind spot away from the other cadets, so they managed to quickly rush down the road. Exelias could run swiftly even on hard soil, which meant they reached immense speeds on paved surfaces.

Air crossed the Lakuta ruins region with the speed of a soaring falcon.

As they made their way to the heart of the battle, Rain and Air sorted through the information they had.

“I didn’t think we’d run into it this fast.”

“Neither did I.”

They needed to think of a plan. Victory seemed within their grasp, but the Razor-Edge Model changed everything. It had likely been placed in the western base assigned to watch over the mine. That, coupled with its slow start-up time, explained why it’d joined the battle so late.

……

They’d gotten extremely unlucky, to say the least. They hadn’t anticipated enemy reinforcements in the form of a second-generation Exelia here.

Kreis’s words came to mind: *“This unit is* fifty times *the weight of a normal Exelia…”* It had impregnable defenses. And currently it was wreaking havoc, turning the tides.

Information on the Razor-Edge Model was classified, so none of the soldiers who were locked in combat with it knew what to do. The only ones present who understood its true power were Rain and Air, who’d heard about it from Kreis.

But even then, how are we supposed to beat that thing?

The two of them watched the massive unit storm through the battlefield, still unsure what to do. And at that exact moment, a wireless transmission reached their ears.

“Incoming report.”

A scheduled message from HQ resounded.

“We are under attack by a unique unit that has entered the combat area. The manipulator of that unit is attempting to make contact with us. The East rejects any attempts for negotiation on principle. No one should respond.”

This is… A warning. An enemy soldier wished to negotiate with them, and HQ warned everyone to ignore it. Any other soldier would have immediately understood, however…

“The contents of their transmission are as follows: ‘My name is Kaisei Reisman.’”

…Rain and Air heard something different within that message.

“You are forbidden from accepting transmissions from that officer.”

Kaisei…

Rain felt a chill run down his spine. He felt immense fear for a moment because of Air, who sat in the seat in front of him.

“I see…”

That single utterance contained an unspeakable amount of rage, and he noticed her back shiver. She shook with intense anger…and her emotional reaction made perfect sense. If Kaisei was who they thought he was…if he truly controlled the Ghosts and manipulated Deadrim’s desire for peace to his own ends…they could never forgive him.

“Hmph,” Air exhaled once. “Isn’t this a nice twist of fate? Putting the stolen second-generation Exelia aside, we’ve run into the man I most want to see. If we defeat the Razor-Edge Model, we can meet Kaisei. And I, for one, refuse to let this stroke of luck pass us by.”

“What do we do?”

“Win, obviously.”

“Sounds good to me…,” Rain said, nodding in agreement.

No one but them had any chance of dealing with the Razor-Edge Model. But a reckless approach to it made no logical sense. They needed to cook up a plan to defeat the monstrosity. And as far as they could see, they had no real countermeasures at hand.

The black beast continued its one-sided rampage. It simply charged forward, felling Exelias left and right. It had such overwhelming defensive and offensive capabilities that it almost seemed like there was no real path to victory. But thanks to her trained eye, Air noticed that something seemed off.

“…This makes no sense.”

“What?”

“It’s moving *way* too fast.”

“Huh? I mean, yeah?”

“No, you don’t get it.”

Something felt off, but whatever it was didn’t have to do with the Razor-Edge Model movements, per se.

“It’s navigating too well. I’ve been watching it rush around, and I’ve noticed that it’s fighting like it can see through everything in its path. The thing’s driving through a forest, which means its vision is impaired by the trees, but it’s still not getting lost.”

“Oh, now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“No matter how good a unit’s specs are, it’s a sitting duck if it can’t see. Usually, a unit works in tandem with its consorts to counteract that, but the Razor-Edge Model’s all alone. It should have tons of blind spots, but it’s fighting like it’s part of a team. That shouldn’t be possible.”

In other words…

“You’re trying to say there’s a hidden force helping it, right?”

That was something Rain would never have noticed on his own. But that conclusion begged the question, Where were they? As far as Rain could see,

the Razor-Edge Model fought on its own. No Exelia was small enough to actually hide, and while the climb up from the Lakuta ruin region to the mine offered a view of the area below, the actual battle was taking place near the mine.

Rain was certain no other western Exelia occupied the area, but Air proclaimed that the Razor-Edge Model wasn't working on its own. That meant it was getting information from somewhere, but…

…It can't be!

The moment the thought occurred to him, Rain looked around wildly, feeling startled. This was no ordinary forested mountain. It was the Lakuta ruins region. People still lived here. And since they'd launched a surprise attack, the residents of the town weren't given a notice to evacuate. Many of them had failed to flee in time…or simply decided to wait out the battle.

Of course, the soldiers fought with no regard for the lives around them, so some civilians got caught in the cross fire. But even so, many of them refused to flee.

Where…? Rain wondered as he looked around. But he only saw dilapidated houses, a ruined church, and water storage facilities.

Where could they be? Rain tried to figure out the enemy's position as he looked east.

Oh, there! And eventually, he arrived at an answer. *That's the perfect hiding spot…*

Once he'd found what he was looking for, Rain told Air their destination.

A one-hundred-and-thirty-foot clock tower stood in the center of the ruins. Later, Rain would learn that it had served as a tourist attraction before war ravaged the area. It was a symbol of the city, of the dreams of its many citizens who wished for peace. But at that moment, Rain stood at the top of it…

"Hold it right there."

…threatening violence.

"One wrong move, and I'll shoot you through the heart."

Rain kept the muzzle of his rifle fixed forward…at two civilians clad in casual clothes. They had neither firearms nor knives in their hands, but something no ordinary citizen could have had rested at their feet: a military transceiver.

"You've been watching the battlefield and providing instructions this entire time, haven't you?" he asked. The clock tower rose high into the air, making it a perfect observation deck.

"Go on, admit it. You're ordering the Razor-Edge Model around from up here. Isn't that right, Kaisei Reisman?"

"…My," said a slender man with his face hidden under a hood. His attire appeared dirty and his hair seemed disheveled, but he didn't look weak or sickly. He possessed the toned body of a soldier, which was evident even with his clothes. There wasn't a trace of needless flesh anywhere on him.

There are two of them…

Rain had found two young men atop the tower, but only one stood upright. Something about this situation was strange. The man squatting next to the hooded figure was struggling to breathe and cradling his bleeding abdomen. He seemed to be dying, but that wasn't the most surprising thing about him. On closer examination, Rain realized he knew him. It was First Lieutenant Ian, a rather famous western officer.

Why is he here? Rain wondered, feeling extremely confused. The wounded man, Ian, was a high-ranking officer in charge of organizing the West's troops in this region. Rain wouldn't have misidentified him, no matter what state he was in.

"Oh, him?" the hooded young man said with an oddly androgynous voice. "This looked rather troublesome, so I brought him along. He's apparently pretty important in the West, so I figured he'd be good insurance."

"……" Rain fell silent. The situation felt incomprehensible. First Lieutenant Ian had authority on the level of a commandant in the West. Injuring a man of his position and dragging him around was no simple feat.

"So how can I help you? I imagine you didn't climb all the way up here just to take in the sights." Despite the plainness of the hooded man's voice, there was a stark threat behind it. Rain nearly flinched, but he caught himself at the last moment. "Oh, I see. You heard Kaisei was involved and came to see me. Yes, I suppose that makes sense. You're right, I'm the one who's managing the Razor-Edge Model. Though I doubt that's why you've come, given you already know my name. You're here for me."

He readily admitted that he was Kaisei Reisman.

It really is him…

The sole hint Deadrim had left behind was the name of the man responsible for maintaining the war between the East and West over the last century. They'd finally found the man responsible for the creation of Ghosts… Rain had no intention of letting him escape.

I'll finish him here! He planned to settle the score. And as soon as he made the decision, Rain prepared to shoot his rifle. However…

Ah!

…Kaisei crumpled in place and fell forward, as if his legs had suddenly given out. Or, at least, that was what he wanted Rain to believe. Unfortunately, the truth was entirely different. After he bent forward, Kaisei swiftly drew the rifle on his back.

Shit!

He'd fallen forward to trick Rain and quickly draw his gun, which had worked perfectly.

Fuck!

Ideally, he'd hoped to take him alive, but Rain had lost that opportunity. There was so much information to gain from him. If he was involved with the Ghosts, there were many questions he could answer. To what end did he create the Ghosts? What was the point of continuing the war for so long? Why did the Ghosts even exist?

If Rain killed him in self-defense, the answers to those secrets would forever be lost. And worse yet, if Kaisei truly was the one who'd created the Ghosts, what would happen if he was struck by the Devil's Bullet?

All the Ghosts he created, including Air, might get erased…

When that thought crossed his mind, Rain hesitated. He stiffened, refusing to pull the trigger. However…

"Do it."

…a voice cut through his hesitation.

"Shoot him, Rain!" Air roared, wiping away his doubts. She ordered him to take Kaisei's life despite the possible consequences. She'd accepted any outcome.

You're so strong…

Air had long since made her decision. She knew what they had to do, even if it meant erasing her existence, so she'd summoned her resolve. Rain clearly understood that…and he decided to honor her firm will.

Die, Kaisei! Rain thought as he fired his gun and the silver bullet in its chamber. The Bullet Magic capable of wiping anyone from existence crossed the few yards between Rain and Kaisei. The hooded figure disappeared before Rain and Air even got a good look at his face. Or, at least, that was how it should have ended. And yet…

“See you later.”

…the very next moment, blood spurted.

“What?!”

But not from Kaisei’s body. The other western officer, First Lieutenant Ian, was hit. The silver bullet lodged directly into the crouched man’s skull.

“No way!”

Rain couldn’t have missed. The bullet he’d fired flew straight at Kaisei, and it hadn’t misfired. But somehow, the silver bullet hit First Lieutenant Ian, who sat next to him.

“Ha-ha-ha,” Kaisei sneered. It appeared everything had gone according to his plan. The Devil’s Bullet’s effect would activate, altering reality irreversibly.

Shit, this is bad!

“Good-bye, Rain Lantz.”

After that final utterance echoed in Rain’s ears…the world shifted.

An odd sense of vertigo dominated Rain’s mind, scrambling his brain.

Ugh…

The Reprogramming had taken effect. Rain no longer stood in the clock tower. Instead, he found himself amid a blazing battlefield. The moment he realized that, he tensed, expecting an enemy attack. But none came his way.

On closer inspection, he realized his mistake. Trees burned before him, and he stood in the middle of a battlefield, but all the units around him were O’ltmenian.

They rode down the mountain at low speed. And eventually, Rain’s vehicle’s radio spurted out a report that cleared up his doubts.

“All remaining units from the third squad are to return to formation. There could still be enemies lying in ambush. Don’t let your guard down just because we won.”

The report delivered rather shocking news. Reality had shifted, creating a world where the East won the Lakuta ruins region battle with little difficulty.

What the hell? What had happened? Prior to the Reprogramming, the battle had swung in the West’s favor due to the Razor-Edge Model’s intervention. But in this new world, the East had easily claimed victory.

First things first, we need to know what’s happening… Rain required information to plan out his next steps. Turning his gaze forward, he found that he shared an Exelia with Athly. That particular detail seemed to have changed.

“Athly,” Rain called out to her. “Um, I know this sounds strange, but I’ve gotta ask you something. Where are we again?”

He knew his question sounded unnatural, but he had no time to spare. If she probed him, he planned to gloss over that fact. But to his surprise, his question…went completely unanswered.

Wait, what?

Athly remained silent. And not because she hadn't heard him, either. When he bent over to get a better look at her face, he realized she was cradling her head as though dizzy.

What's wrong with her? I asked a pretty simple question.

"Oh, sorry, I, um…," she said before pausing for a moment. "M-my head…hurts."

"Your head hurts? Why? Did you get injured back there?"

"No, it's, um, I banged my head a little earlier… Ha-ha, ha-ha-ha…," Athly said and moved her head, looking around. Apparently, she didn't know where they were, either.

Sure, Rain had no right to complain, since he'd asked her the same question, but that seemed more fitting for a gunner. They often didn't have the best grasp of their environment, so his lack of knowledge wasn't entirely outside the realm of possibility. However, manipulators like Athly relied on their knowledge of positioning and terrain, so she had no excuse.

Did she actually hurt her head? Rain worried about Athly for a moment before shifting his focus. There were more pressing matters to address, after all.

Kaisei… The man who'd devised this Reprogramming still remained among the living. How much did he know? What was his true goal? Those were the questions that took over his mind, sweeping away any concerns he had about Athly.

3. AIR AND ATHLY IN THE BATH

"Phew…"

It was 2:00 AM. Everyone aside from the people out on night patrol was fast asleep, but Athly made her way over to the bath.

There really isn't anyone around at this time of night.

That day's surprise attack had ended in victory for the East. The cadets, who'd served as reserve troops, got sent back to rest in a nearby satellite base. Luckily, they didn't have to assist with any cleanup.

They'd arrived late at night, so most went straight to bed. But after lying awake for some time, Athly realized she couldn't sleep and headed for the bathhouse located in the base's annex.

The hot water had already been turned off, but what little remained in the tub felt lukewarm enough. She used the girls' bathroom, which seemed fairly hygienic and well-maintained.

"……"

After taking off her clothes, Athly looked down at her body and noticed that she was covered in more soot and mud than she'd initially thought. A man might've ignored the sight and gone to bed, but the idea of staying dirty made her uncomfortable. And so, she scooped up water from the tub and washed herself off, then tied her hair back. A second later, she thoroughly scrubbed the filth off her body and submerged herself.

"Aaah…" A sigh escaped her lips as all the tension drained from her body.

When was the last time she'd relaxed in a bath? Satellite bases usually only had shower stalls, so this was a rare treat. As her body relaxed, the tension that had built up melted away.

……

Unfortunately, that also meant her mind wandered to matters she'd intentionally tried to avoid.

We won…

O'ltmenia had emerged victorious for once. They'd accomplished their goal while suffering zero casualties. Athly had gotten everything she could have ever wanted, which filled her heart with joy, but something still didn't add up.

This is wrong… Athly knew the truth. The East hadn't truly earned their victory. *Is this world even real?*

She had no answer to that question. She could have been dreaming, delusional, or even psychotic because of trauma. Those felt like far more

realistic options than the alternative. What she'd experienced seemed that absurd.

This world I'm in right now… It wasn't the real world. Or rather, it definitely *was* real, but it wasn't hers. *It's not the world I'm from.*

Athly knew that seemed insane. But while she normally would have laughed off the idea, she had to accept it as fact because of what she'd experienced thus far.

She'd experienced the same odd headache many times over the last few months. Time and again, her head would hurt, her field of vision would darken, and then the world would change.

"……"

She vividly remembered the first time it had happened. It was the day she'd first shot a person—the day she'd killed Kirlilith. The bullet she'd fired had torn into Kirlilith's heart. Then, a second later, everything went black… and the world around her changed.

That was the first time… Athly had encountered Kirlilith in a burning forest, but the very next moment, she'd found herself in her barracks' cafeteria, eating a leisurely lunch.

Later, after some digging, she discovered an astonishing fact.

The girl she'd shot, Kirlilith, never even existed in the first place.

…Was that all a dream?

When she'd tried to convince herself of that, she found a bullet casing with Kirlilith's name etched onto it. That served as undeniable proof that she'd killed the one who'd murdered her parents, so how could she write it off as a mere daydream?

Everything she'd gone through was real. She'd definitely experienced all that.

And it didn't happen just once.

Since that day when she shot Kirlilith, she'd felt the world change multiple times. Regardless of whether she was resting at home, in the middle of a supplementary class, or walking around town…the world trembled and morphed before her very eyes.

Of course, there were also times when the changes weren't noticeable. If anything, that happened more often than not, which helped her pretend nothing had actually happened. Still, she couldn't lie to herself anymore. Athly refused to ignore the truth any longer.

The day's events had confirmed one of her long-held suspicions.

Rain… The boy who was once her partner, who should have been an ordinary, O'ltmenian cadet, rose to the forefront of her mind.

He's experiencing the exact same thing I am… I'm sure of it.

Now that she knew she wasn't alone, she finally accepted her fate. When the world had changed earlier, Rain suddenly asked her where they were. There were a few other times he'd asked peculiar questions, but that was the final nail in the coffin. A soldier wouldn't have forgotten such a basic fact.

Like her, Rain had appeared in an unknown situation. That was why he needed information. And the one to blame for all that…was likely the mysterious silver-haired transfer student.

I bet it happens to Air as well…

Athly had no proof, but her intuition led her to that answer. Ever since she'd transferred in a few months ago, Air had started working alongside Rain. No one knew the specifics of their relationship, but that wasn't because of a lack of curiosity.

Those two clearly shared a secret. And it was something they couldn't afford to let anyone else discover.

Air, huh…?

Athly scooped up some water and scrubbed her face as if to scrub away the thoughts of that enigmatic girl of silver.

And then, it happened… The bathroom door opened with a loud *clank*, and someone walked in. Apparently, another girl had the same idea as Athly, which was all well and good. However—

"Ugh!" Athly exclaimed unintentionally. The one who showed up was Air, the very person she'd been thinking about. And Air noticed it was already occupied only after walking in.

"Oh…," Air mumbled hesitantly, stopping in her tracks. She clearly hadn't expected anyone else to be there at that time of night. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to take a bath, just like you. Obviously…"

"……" Air looked conflicted. Some part of her wanted to turn around and leave, but she'd already waited long enough to clean the dirt and sweat that clung to her. Air was a girl, too, after all, so she found the urge to wash herself hard to ignore.

"……" Air eventually gave in to that impulse. Remaining speechless, she dipped a bucket into the water and started washing herself off. She rinsed her body gently, scrubbing away the grime, and then slipped into the water, sitting as far away from Athly as possible.

Air had decided to turn her face away and blatantly ignore Athy, it seemed.

Talk about being blunt…

"Don't talk to me," Air suddenly said, as if she'd read Athly's mind. But for all her attempts to keep her distance, the bath was by no means large. The girls sat across from each other diagonally, with only six or so feet separating them, so Athly could see Air clearly. She simply sat in the water, regarding the silver girl with a sidelong glance.

*This isn't my first time thinking about it, but she's…*really *pretty…*, Athly thought, remembering her first impression of Air as she stared at her. She truly was beautiful. And while Athly usually took great care to maintain her looks, seeing Air in the hot water made it clear that most of it was still natural. Her hair was tied up and her skin, although a bit sweaty, was exposed. Had Athly been a boy, her heart would have exploded.

The silver girl was *incredibly* attractive.

And ever since he'd met her, Rain had grown distant from Athly.

"Hey, Air," Athly called out to her. Normally, she'd have elected to ignore her back, but she wanted to discuss something.

"……" Air, however, remained silent, ignoring her entirely.

"I know you can hear me, Air. Come on."

Air didn't so much as look at her. Instead, she decided to keep ignoring Athly and defiantly turned her face away.

"……"

That royally pissed off Athly. She felt she'd done nothing wrong, so she moved toward the other girl. But even as she leaned within arm's reach, Air didn't so much as spare her a glance.

"……" Air remained as still and silent as a statue. And so, Athly decided to resort to drastic measures.

"Take this!" Athly roared and cupped her hands around Air's breasts.

"Eek!" The silver girl let out an adorable yelp. "What the hell are you doing?!"

"Bfah!" Athly screamed as she took a good splash to the face.

"What the hell was that?! Why did you touch my boobs?!"

"Well, uh, because you kept ignoring me… You left me with no other choice!"

“What kind of screwed up logic is that?!”

“Come on. We can talk a little, right?”

“…No,” Air said, taking a frightened step back, covering her chest with her arms. Her guard was up now.

“Aww, don’t be a spoilsport. Running into each other here must have been fate, so cut me some slack. We know each other, but we’ve hardly ever spoken.”

“That’s because we’ve got nothing to say to each other.”

“Well, that’s not true. I’ve got tons of stuff I want to tell you.”

“And I couldn’t care less!” Air scoffed unpleasantly and looked away.

Another period of silence emerged as Air went back to actively ignoring Athly. She started to pretend Athly wasn’t even there.

“Oh, don’t say that,” Athly mumbled and raised her hand again.

In response, Air twitched and moved back, guarding her chest with both arms from a second strike. The skittish reaction sparked a desire in Athly to do it a second time.

…Time to cop another feel.

Deciding that another go would be more fun, Athly extended her hand toward Air. But then she got a better look at Air’s body, and she froze.

Air’s torso was wrapped in a towel. Normally, a person removed that before entering a bathhouse, but Air had kept it on the whole time.

……

When Athly fondled her, she’d groped over the towel, which had made the fabric shift a little, exposing parts of her chest.

And thanks to that, she saw that countless old scars were etched onto Air’s skin.

Ah…!

Bullet wounds. Lacerations. Including some of the smaller ones, there were countless blemishes all over her limbs. Athly realized, a moment too late, why Air had walked into the tub in a towel. Perhaps she would’ve figured it out sooner if she’d thought a bit more, but it was too late for regrets.

Hmm… Athly understood that Air must’ve lived a rather difficult life. The scars were proof of that fact. But saying sorry at this point felt wrong, so she didn’t. Instead, she thought it best to pretend she didn’t see anything. Some soldiers had suffered even more severe injuries, after all. Her past wounds didn’t mean she needed pity.

“Um…” Athly decided to change the topic. Turning to face Air, she tried to say something that’d pique her interest… “Your boobs are way bigger than I thought.”

“Okay, I’m going to knock you out now,” Air replied, clearly enraged.

Well, I definitely just put my foot in my mouth.

Air rose to her feet and approached Athly angrily.

“Whoa, h-hold up! Um…” Athly racked her brain, trying desperately to come up with something to say to prevent any violence.

For all her joking, she really did have things she wished to discuss with Air. A lot of questions about the mysterious phenomenon Athly had experienced floated to her mind, but would Air answer those questions honestly? Did Athly have any guarantee that Air would tell her the full, honest truth?

I don’t…

Even if all of Athly’s suspicions were correct, this girl would never confirm them. She could tell Air harbored a deep darkness in her heart. And her apparent dignity was perhaps nothing more than a lack of trust. That was why everyone else sensed that she was far stronger than her appearance implied.

She let no one approach her…with one exception.

Rain.

……

Over the course of the last few months, she’d seen Air fool everyone in Alestra Academy. She walked around with a cheap, fake smile on her face, caring nothing for the other students.

She clearly didn’t even see them as her classmates. She merely considered social interactions a “duty” she had to fulfill. That was the kind of person she was. She realized the importance of human relations, so she didn’t neglect them, but in truth, she trusted almost no one. She refused to close the gap between herself and others and kept anyone from trying to do so themselves.

However, her attitude seemed completely different when she interacted with Rain. Air herself probably didn’t realize it…and Rain, as dense as he was, likely failed to notice it as well. But from the outside, the difference was night and day.

Air rarely smiled when she was with him. The mask she wore around everyone else disappeared when they were together. She acted moody and bored, but despite her cheerlessness, she refused to leave his side. She simply spent time with him, forming a seemingly casual relationship.

They always spoke in hushed whispers, and they never exchanged any jokes, but every now and then, Air teased him with a cynical smile on her face. And the amusement there was real.

The silver girl stood by Rain, while Athly watched them from the side.

……

Instead of focusing on a complicated question, Athly decided to simply ask her about herself.

“Where are you from, Air?”

“……”

“I’ll keep asking until you answer, by the way.”

"…The eastern edge of O'ltmenia," Air muttered bitterly, seemingly giving up. "A small town called Linbell. There's nothing special about the place. It's just a rural town."

That was the first time Athly had ever heard the name. Yet what mattered wasn't the answer, but the fact that Air had actually responded. She'd shown no interest in her thus far, so Athly thought she'd ignore her questions altogether. Hearing an actual answer made relief wash over her.

"If you're from a small town, you must've studied at some other training facility before getting into Alestra Academy, right? I mean, I'd imagine transferring in from the countryside is hard. I live near the capital, and even I had a tough time."

"If you have the talent, you'll succeed no matter where you are."

Athly knew next to nothing about Air. She'd appeared in Alestra Academy at an odd time, long after the semester started, and she seemed detached from the rest of the world. But she was still human. She couldn't have simply popped out of the ether, so Athly wanted to know more about her.

I have to keep pushing… Athly asked Air more questions after that: what she majored in, what her hometown and family were like, and other things along those lines…

Air, for her part, answered every single one, never pausing to even think. And because of that, Athly couldn't shake the feeling that all these answers were lies she'd thought up beforehand.

……

Eventually, she realized her roundabout approach was pointless. She had no way of figuring out anything by tracing Air's origins. Air seemed clever, so even if she was lying, she'd have fail-safes in place. Athly had to try something else.

She had to ask the more serious questions on her mind.

The image of the silver bullet flashed through her mind. She needed an explanation for the bullet casing in her possession that had Kirlilith's name etched onto it and the countless incomprehensible phenomena it caused. She had to ask Air about them.

Of course, she had no proof that Air knew anything about it. The probability of that seemed low, and even if she did, she'd probably avoid the question. Still, Athly couldn't bear not knowing any longer. She had to ask. However, she failed to act in time.

"Phew," Air exclaimed as she broke eye contact and rose to her feet. "Bye."

Athly got up as well and exclaimed, "W-wait!"

She then reached out toward Air in an attempt to keep her from leaving. And when her hand neared Air's shoulder…

Splash! …she found herself crashing into the water.

"Ow!"

Her field of vision flipped, and before she knew it, she was looking at the ceiling.

“Ugh…,” she moaned.

“Don’t touch me.”

Athly couldn’t immediately piece together what had happened. She understood she’d been thrown, but that was all. And she only figured out the truth when she sat up…and a dull pain ran down her back.

“Ugh…”

It hurt. She couldn’t breathe. She’d been knocked into the water, but for some reason, it felt like she’d been slammed against the floor. Had it actually been a hard, stone floor, the shock might have broken her waist or a limb. She hadn’t just been fended off; she’d been attacked.

“Ah, haaah… Ngh…”

The pain ran deep enough that she couldn’t inhale properly, so she found it hard to form proper words. She could only moan and struggle to catch her breath.

“Seems I knocked you down pretty hard,” the silver girl said, not even turning around to look at her. “It might hurt a little, but it’ll get better in a minute. Just cool your head and wait.”

After saying that, she began walking out of the bathroom. Athly realized then that she had been completely rejected, making it clear that she had no right to approach her.

“Wh-what…?”

It hurt to breathe, and her thoughts were disjointed, but she still desperately tried to speak. A question different from what she wanted to ask earlier left her lips.

“Wh-what are…you and Rain?”

“…Rain?” Air reacted to the name. Perhaps it was because he was the one thing they really had in common. She stopped in her tracks and turned around, her expression dubious. She apparently hadn’t expected him to come up.

That was the one question Athly didn’t wish to delay. She’d decided, time and again, that she’d ask it as soon as possible.

“Yes, Rain. Air… What are you and Rain doing?”

Athly’s question sounded simple enough. What exactly did Rain and Air do as a team? What secrets were they hiding? Those questions had weighed on her mind for months. Honestly speaking, she had little to no accurate information. She could only surmise what happened based on her own experiences, so she needed firm answers.

The silver bullet wasn’t normal Bullet Magic. It harbored a special power. But as for what that bullet actually did, and whether Rain actually knew of it, Athly was completely in the dark. And so she simply asked about it, point-blank, to get a reaction she could gauge.

If Air was entirely disconnected from the matter, she'd give a confused response, since she'd have no time to falsify a reaction. But if she had something to hide, she would show a flash of terror.

"What do you…?" Air reacted in surprise to Athly's sudden question, which made the situation abundantly clear. For the first time that night, her detached expression distorted and her expressionless facade crumpled. "… How much do you know?"

But it was more than just that. Athly saw it. She noticed Air had bent over ever so slightly and positioned her right hand behind her waist.

No way…!

A cold, chilling surge of bloodlust struck Athly.

Sh-she… She just…!

Air had moved on reflex. A mage's automatic instinct was to reach for their pistol in times of danger. But of course, Air didn't have any weapon to draw, so she quickly moved her arm back. It was a swift gesture that lasted less than a second, a movement so smooth that most would've missed it altogether. But Athly saw it.

Did she just…try to kill me?!

When asked the question, Air's first reaction was to try to draw a gun on her. The girl quickly pulled her arm back when she remembered where they were, but Athly had been on many battlefields, so she recognized the intentions all the same.

Air had thought of killing her. If she had had her gun, she'd have shot Athly dead, and all because of a simple question. She wished to protect her secret that badly.

"……"

"…Tell me, Athly, how much do you know?"

For a long moment, the two of them kept their gazes locked. They were both naked and unarmed for a deadly battle. Knowing that, Air did her best to seem docile, but she couldn't hide the bloodlust she'd let show mere moments ago. She'd made a huge mistake. And that momentary lapse confirmed Athly's suspicions.

I knew it… This girl and Rain are hiding something big!

It was an important enough secret that they'd choose to kill whoever learned of it, even someone from their own army. The gazes of the two girls remained locked on each other in strained tension for another minute or so.

"……"

"……"

Air and Athly looked at each other, not moving a muscle. Neither of them wanted to let the other casually walk out of the bathroom any longer. Athly was afraid of letting Air go, since she could return with a gun, while Air refused to let someone who knew about her secret walk around freely. They both wanted to finish things right then and there.

A minute or so passed, though it felt like much longer to their anxious minds, before something broke the deadlock between the two naked girls.

A shrill siren blared.

“Ah…!”

This wasn’t a typical alarm; this one alerted the soldiers in the base of an emergency.

“We’ve detected a western Exelia near the base! There’s a high probability of an attack! All hands, prepare to intercept!”

4. THE TRUTH SHE NEVER WISHED TO LEARN

The siren eased the tension. As soon as they heard about a potential enemy assault, they burst out of the bathroom and ran to their rooms.

Athly didn't have time to waste getting dressed, so she quickly put on her top and trousers while she was still dripping wet.

The alarm warned of an impending attack from the enemy, which meant they had to go intercept them. And so, Air sprinted to her room on the east side to prepare her weapons for the battle to come. However, Athly didn't follow suit. Instead, she turned away from Air and ran in the opposite direction.

Rain… Rain… She sprinted toward the men's barracks, mentally chanting one boy's name all the while. One thought had eclipsed her duty as a soldier.

Her highest priority was reaching Rain before Air did.

…Air tried to shoot me!

The memory of their encounter remained vivid. When Air thought Athly knew their secret, she moved to end her life.

Rain… Athly had no concrete reason to believe he would react differently. But he might. They'd spent a lot of time together, so there was a chance Rain would hear her out.

Anyone who knows the secret has to die…

But…what if he didn't? What if Rain, like Air, was willing to kill her to keep their secret? She couldn't outright deny that possibility, at least.

No, I can worry about that later. I have to find Rain before Air does…

And if she wanted to get to Rain first, the enemy assault was a stroke of luck. The army had ordered an emergency sortie, so Athly simply had to catch him and ride out into battle with him before Air could. That seemed like the best way to survive her current predicament.

Athly finally reached the men's dorm, which was already in chaos. Regular soldiers and cadets ran about, preparing for the battle at hand. The hallway was heavily congested, probably because over two hundred people were using it. Some soldiers hurried to the hangars, while others headed to the command post.

Luckily, Athly spotted Rain among the crowd and called out to him, "Rain!"

"What?!"

She dashed toward the familiar figure and dove straight into his chest.

"Whoa!"

“Thank God…!”

“Wh-what’s the—?!!” Rain caught her in his arms, then did a double take when he realized how she was dressed.

The water dripping down her body was alluring enough, but her top was also unzipped, revealing her chest, and she clearly wasn’t wearing any undergarments. No one around them seemed to notice because of the emergency, but the close proximity made it readily apparent to Rain.

“Rain, come with me,” Athly demanded, paying her appearance no mind.

“Wait, what?”

“There’s an emergency dispatch. They asked cadets to form impromptu pairs and go on patrol. Come on, let’s go,” Athly lied hurriedly as she dragged Rain along. He should’ve partnered with Air, but she made up something to get him out of there.

She’d lied to get her way, but at that point, it didn’t bother her. Her life was in danger, so she had to risk it.

Please…Rain, please…, Athly prayed in her heart. She wished as hard as she could that Rain would fall for her poor lie.

Rain paused for a moment to consider what she’d just said, mulling over his options. But eventually, he made his decision.

“Impromptu pairs, huh? Well…”

Athly’s desperate gamble…

“Okay, let’s head to the Exelia hangar.”

…paid off.

“…Right. Let’s go!” Athly exclaimed. She knew that reinforcing a lie with another lie would only create a more tangled predicament. Even a child knew that much. But lies were the best she could manage in that situation. She grasped Rain’s hands tightly and left the corridor, towing him after her.

A few moments after Athly and Rain concluded their exchange, Air appeared.

“Haaah, haaah…,” she gasped and panted as she looked around, hoping to spot her partner.

Where is he…?

Athly had just barely beaten her to the punch.

Where did he go?!

Air had dashed through the crowd in her disheveled coat. On her back, she carried her two rifles, and her personal pistol hung from her waist. They were truly lethal weapons with silver bullets in their chambers.

Rain…? Air wondered where he was as she searched for him in the crowd. She figured he might’ve left already, but believing he would be there, she kept looking. However, she failed to find him after ten minutes.

Luck had favored Athly, leaving Air behind.

A large number of mages had gathered in the Exelia hangar. An emergency dispatch meant prelaunch procedures were greatly shortened, so Athly and Rain quickly obtained a rough map of the area and got into an M4 Exelia.

Their dispatch point, which was a mile to the west, was marked on the map. Their mission was to search for a suspicious intruder and call for reinforcements if needed. The two of them weren't standard soldiers but cadets. And cadets were treated differently in emergencies. That was why they'd gotten reconnaissance duty.

"Rain."

"Yeah."

Rain boarded the Exelia after hearing her call out to him. And as soon as she got into the manipulator's seat, Athly stepped on the pedals with both legs and swiftly accelerated.

Their Exelia reached maximum speed within seconds as they headed a mile west. There were no signs of people or other facilities in their way, so they stopped along a road that was halfway up a mountain. It overlooked the base, making it the perfect place to keep watch, so the eastern army had gone to great lengths to hide it.

Only HQ knew about the spot, so it was unlikely that an enemy soldier had found it.

"……"

They soon reached their designated spot, which was an abandoned rock formation. Athly parked their Exelia in a relatively open area, completing their preparations. All that remained was to keep watch and report to HQ if they detected the enemy.

Sunrise was close at hand, so faint moonlight was the only source of illumination on the mountain. Visibility was poor, and no matter where they looked, pitch-black darkness surrounded them.

The moonlight failed to illuminate vast strips of the surrounding woods. But conversely, the lack of visibility applied to the enemy as well. The moment anyone turned on their Exelia's lights, they'd reveal their position. And if a western unit did that, they'd get crushed by the combined might of the entire eastern army.

"……"

An hour passed as they remained on guard duty. Nothing unusual happened, so they simply responded to the scheduled transmissions sent their way. No one had spotted the enemy since the initial sighting.

This is strange… Athly pondered what that meant.

Another thirty minutes passed before Rain spoke up, saying, "This is a dud. I bet the enemy ran off. They kicked us out of bed for nothing."

Rain hung his head, lamenting the wasted time and effort. He then sank into his seat, preparing to fall asleep. They'd spent all day traveling to carry out a surprise attack, which had tired him out.

Athly sighed as she looked at him and said, "You can sleep if you want, but that means you're keeping watch on the way back. Got it?"

"You should also get some sleep."

"No, I can't do that."

There was no sign of the enemy. Knowing that much, all they could do was wait for their next orders. The fact that no one could find the enemy unit didn't mean they'd be called back immediately. In fact, they'd likely wait another two hours in that position.

Their mission was, for all intents and purposes, to stay put and wait. Any normal cadet would have fallen asleep, even if their partner had also zoned out. And honestly, if it had been any other day, even the straitlaced Athly would've counted among them.

I can't sleep…, Athly thought, nerves strained. Her heart had been thumping since she'd come out on this mission. No, even before that. She was sweaty and sick to her stomach, but none of it had to do with the enemy raid. That was the least pressing thing on Athly's mind.

She'd effectively admitted to Air that she knew their secret, which ended with an attempt to silence her. She faced mortal danger.

And now that she'd dragged Rain away, Air would believe she was hostile. If Athly returned to the base, Air would kill her before letting her speak even a word in her defense. And so, she had to talk things over with him right away.

That's my only way out…

Air was exceedingly cautious, and Rain was just as sharp as she was, but he would be slightly less cautious around someone he'd known for many years. They'd been partners for such a long time and had built up a bond of trust between them.

Athly decided to gamble on that relationship and speak to him, hoping to discover more of the truth and survive.

What were Rain and Air up to? What was their true objective? What dark secret had they hidden from everyone else?

These answers would clear the anxieties that had plagued her for the past few months. And only Rain and Air could provide them.

She planned to learn how the silver bullet, the people who disappeared, and the repeated shifting of the world all linked together by speaking to Rain. And yet…Athly faltered.

I…

Rain prepared to turn over and fall asleep, but she still couldn't muster up the courage to call out to him. She had a sinking feeling that the moment she spoke about it, her relationship with Rain would crumble.

I'm scared…

Once she asked even a single question, there was no turning back. The moment she probed into this secret, her relationship with Rain would irrevocably change. But even knowing that, she knew she couldn't stop.

That fire in Athly's heart was still burning—the fire that had reduced her home and parents to ash. Whenever she wavered and found herself unsure of what to do, the sight of her burning parents, as well as the crimson girl who'd killed them, floated to the top of her mind. She remembered what happened every time.

She'd tried closing her eyes, but it felt like the image had somehow burned into the back of her eyelids, overshadowing her inner conflict.

……

Rain had fallen asleep. He'd been trained to take advantage of any short period of time to catch up on his rest. That seemed like the perfect moment to question him, but Athly knew better than to mistake his current helplessness for genuine weakness.

Her hand crept to her waist…toward her pistol.

…I'll probably need this.

She expected their discussion to turn into a negotiation, so she needed a weapon. Considering her position, she had to assume the worst. She had to assume Rain would consider shooting her. And so, she prepared herself for that outcome by confirming her weapon worked.

Athly steeled her heart, no longer holding any optimistic expectations or hopes.

I guess I can't service my gun here… She realized she couldn't afford to make any noise, so she hopped off the Exelia and down to the ground. Leaving Rain behind, she entered the woods and jogged to an area illuminated by the moonlight. She eventually stopped at a point one hundred and fifty feet away to service her gun.

The trees around her looked extremely thick, and she ended up farther away from the Exelia than she'd planned, which seemed suspicious. Then again, if Rain woke up and asked, she had the option of lying about going to the bathroom.

However, when she stopped in those woods…

"Huh…?!"

…she found something extremely startling.

Something that couldn't have been there, something that *shouldn't* have been there, appeared before her very eyes.

"…Oh? Who's there?" a rather slender figure asked. "Now, what are you doing so far off the beaten path?"

It was hard to tell their gender due to their baggy, light-blue clothes and fair skin, but the voice clearly belonged to a man.

But that wasn't the reason for her surprise. A man appearing in the middle of the woods was startling enough, but the massive, black machine behind him really grabbed her attention.

The man sat atop a mechanical monstrosity…the Razor-Edge Model she'd seen rampaging through the battlefield that very afternoon.

I have to take him out… Athly drew her pistol and fired a bullet without a second thought. There was no room for negotiation or conversation. He was a soldier of the West, and perhaps even the one they'd been after.

But the moment she shot her Bullet Magic…

"Wow…"

"Ah…!"

"That's a nice gun you've got there. Let me take a look."

…the pistol slipped out of Athly’s fingers. In the blink of an eye, the man appeared in front of Athly and caught her right hand.

“L-let go!”

“Oh, sorry,” the man said as he released Athly, who stumbled back a few steps.

“There’s no need to panic. I’m not a bad person,” he claimed as he let out a light chuckle.

“Ugh…,” Athly grunted as she steadied herself.

The man acted like he’d done nothing out of the ordinary, but he’d somehow closed the gap between them and grabbed her arms in less than a second. The moment she shot at him, he appeared right in front of her and grabbed her hand.

“Who are you…?”

“Who, me?” the man asked as he spread out his arms, acting dumb. “I’m Kaisei. Listen, I promise I’m not looking for a fight. I’m just here to meet a Ghost.”

The man before her had a slender frame and long, thin limbs. He wore baggy light-blue clothes and had long hair that he tied behind his head like a woman’s. Overall, his facial features seemed fair, gentle, and oddly androgynous. But his unusual features couldn’t compare with the strange statement he’d just made.

“A ghost…?”

“That’s right, a Ghost. Do you know about the Ghosts?” he asked, like it was the most casual topic in the world. But Athly paid it no mind.

She had no time to chat. There was no doubt in her mind that he was the intruder, so she needed to eliminate him right away. She had to pick up her pistol. It rested several feet away, meaning she needed at least two whole seconds to retrieve it. But this man was a mage and a pretty skilled one at that. In his presence, one wrong move spelled doom for her.

“Come on, you don’t have to be so wary,” the man said in a soothing tone. He’d easily noticed her gaze flicking over to the pistol on the ground. “Like I said, I’m here to meet a Ghost, not fight someone or steal anything. I know this isn’t the best proof, but you’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Essentially, he claimed he could’ve already killed her if he so desired. His words bordered on being a threat.

“So do you know anything about the Ghosts?” Kaisei carried on, undisturbed.

“I don’t…,” Athly replied, albeit unwillingly. And she was telling the truth.

What was a ghost, truly? The first thing that came to mind was a dead person…or rather, the detached soul of one. And Athly had never seen any of those.

“Oh, sorry. I don’t mean the kind of ghosts that haunt houses. It’s a system I made, you see, and they’re something that really exists. They tend to look like ordinary people.”

“What…?” Athly mumbled, eyeing the man suspiciously. Each of his words made less sense than the last.

“My apologies,” Kaisei said, turning around as he noticed the dubious expression on Athly’s face. But despite the fact that he’d turned his back on her, she didn’t grab her gun. “See, I’m in no real rush. I just wanted to touch base with that Ghost. Generally speaking, I let them roam free. Give me a minute, and I’ll explain everything.”

Kaisei walked back to the Razor-Edge Model and sat atop its fuselage. He seemed to completely relax, and the moonlight shining down on him afforded him a certain mystical quality.

“Ghosts are a special kind of being. Only the most powerful and talented mages can become one.”

“Uh…” Athly could do nothing but voice her incredulity.

“Fundamentally speaking, their job is to spread the war. To stoke the flames, you know? That said, in most cases, they don’t know much beyond that. Most of the time, they just fight however their heart commands them. Despite their uniqueness, they function as part of the military, so you might’ve even met one.”

“I doubt it.”

“Well, maybe you just don’t know it. Like I said, they look like ordinary people.”

His voice sounded so relaxed that one would be hard-pressed to believe he was a soldier in enemy territory. However, his explanation remained cryptic. According to Kaisei, there were magical “Ghosts” who lived and fought only on the battlefield around them.

“Well, for most people, Ghosts are pests that intensify the war. They kill people needlessly, and plenty of towns have been destroyed in the battles they instigated. It’s just second nature to them. And they’re out there, even now.”

“……”

“Again, I don’t mean evil spirits. They actually exist.”

Thus far, his story seemed to have nothing to do with her. She couldn’t imagine any single person causing such destruction. It felt like a legend from a faraway country.

“But things have changed recently,” Kaisei added. “The total number of Ghosts has decreased, starting with one named Kirlilith.”

“Ah…!”

“The Ghost of the Traxil race, Kirlilith. The Ghost of the Oud race, Alec. And oddly enough, even Deadrim, the Ghost of the Achiral race. They were all skilled soldiers, but they’ve been dropping like flies the last few months. It’s…curious, to say the least.”

Most of what Kaisei was saying was nonsense to Athly, but one thing he’d mentioned stuck with her—Kirlilith, the name of the girl who’d killed her parents and burned down her hometown.

How does he know her name?

“Did you hear a name you recognize?” Kaisei asked, noticing the look of confusion on her face.

“Ah…”

“Because, if you did, you’re quite unusual yourself.”

“What?”

“I mean, they’re names you can’t possibly remember,” Kaisei proclaimed. She shouldn’t have recognized any of those names…because *no one* should have.

“Based on your reaction, I’d say you remember Kirlilith.”

“……”

“Gone quiet on me, have you? Oh well… Just so you know, Kirlilith’s existence was wiped from history. That’s why only a select few in this world remember the Crimson Ghost’s name. The world’s changed to one where she never even existed.”

“Never existed?”

“She was erased.”

Erased…

Athly’s right hand, the very one that had ended Kirlilith’s life, trembled in fear.

What is he saying?

Nothing made any sense. Kaisei had suddenly shown up and started talking about the secrets that had bothered her over the past few months. Before their discussion, she’d never imagined that Kirlilith’s name would leave someone else’s lips.

Athly tightened her fist over her right breast pocket…where she’d stored the silver shell with Kirlilith’s name. That was the only proof she’d had that the crimson girl once existed, which became the foundation of all of her anxieties.

Athly’s hand crept into her pocket to confirm the sensation of the shell inside it. But then…

“Oh.”

“Ah…!”

…Kaisei fired a bullet. It was a warning shot aimed near her feet, but it made Athly flinch and drop the bullet casing in her hands.

The man quickly caught and examined the silver case with Kirlilith’s name on it.

“Ha-ha-ha!” He broke out into raucous laughter. “Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Oh, I see, I see! That’s what happened, is it?!” Kaisei nodded, seemingly convinced of something. “I wondered what whim of fate drew you to me… but now I know your role in all this. Ha-ha-ha… The mortal world truly is fickle. I must say, the probability of this happening is effectively zero. It almost makes me believe God exists. Though, if it does, it’s surely a god of war.”

Everything seemed to click into place in his mind, but the same could not be said for Athly. From her perspective, the slender man simply broke

into manic laughter for no real reason. She had no idea what he'd learned by meeting her, what he'd realized, what answers he'd found.

"What are you blabbering about—?" She tried to question him, but he cut her off.

"Air Arland Noah."

"Ah…!"

"Do you know her? She's a short girl who goes to Alestra Academy with you."

Athly held her tongue, but that merely gave him the answer he wanted.

"She's a Ghost, too."

The forest was far too silent for Athly to trick herself into thinking she might've misheard him.

"The divinity she possesses is Oblivion. Her weapon is called the Devil's Bullet—a Bullet Magic with the power to erase the existence of anyone it kills and rewrite history. The silver bullet casing is from one of those."

It took Athly a long moment to understand.

"The Devil's Bullet is obviously powerful, since it completely erases anyone it shoots and alters reality. The only ones who remember its victims are people who've used it, which means it leaves no evidence behind. You can erase anyone that troubles you, and the world will shift and become one where they never even existed. It's an unparalleled weapon…in the right hands, of course."

"Wait, stop!" Athly shouted. Her head spun as he unleashed a torrent of unfiltered information. "What are you saying? Air is a Ghost? What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. She died a hundred years ago."

"What do you mean, she died?"

That made no sense. She'd spent some time in the bath with Air a short while ago. She'd touched her…and her body felt undeniably real. It might have been riddled with scars she wished to hide, but it had a tangible, physical presence.

"Listen, a physical body means little. In fact, her soul is currently occupying someone else's body. All that really matters is that she had a sound soul when she died. Thanks to that, she became a Ghost who can fight no matter how wounded or broken she gets."

Kaisei smiled faintly, apparently delighted to have discovered the purpose of this fateful encounter.

"A Ghost's raison d'être is to fight."

Kaisei paid no attention to Athly's confusion and casually explained, but Athly could tell each word was part of an important secret. And so, she listened intently in hopes of not missing a single word. She could tell he wouldn't repeat himself, and he was providing invaluable information.

"That's why I want them to keep fighting and stimulating the war. Unfortunately, Air's bullet is a real nuisance. Whenever she uses it on a Ghost, she rejects the very reason for her existence. She's never done

anything like this before, but this time around, other Ghosts seem to be her main target."

"How do you…?"

How do you know all this? That question nearly left her lips, but she fell silent. She'd long since realized that nothing the man said had a shred of credibility to it. And yet, for whatever reason, everything rang true.

In fact, she believed every word of it. And not because of something so nebulous as intuition or the flow of the conversation, either. His explanation simply made everything click into place, and that led her to trust him.

Air Arland Noah had suddenly appeared at Alestra Academy and struck up a mysterious relationship with Rain. At first, Athly had assumed they'd met in the past, but was that really the case?

Even if what Kaisei said was true, it felt too unnatural to make sense. If a dead person was resurrected, they would need support to be recognized by the authorities. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to pass herself off as a cadet and join the war effort. But somehow, she fought on, using her Devil's Bullet ability to wipe people out of existence, hiding her identity as a Ghost all the while.

And yet, despite the great care she'd taken to hide her secrets, Athly Magmet had accidentally acquired a Devil's Bullet, which allowed her to notice the shifting of the world. That was something Air could never accept. It was a secret she had to protect at all costs, which was why she'd reacted so acutely.

Athly recalled their exchange in the bath. All she'd done was ask the vague question "What are you and Rain doing?" and Air had motioned to pull her gun in a show of clear intent to kill her… She'd moved to protect the secret of the Devil's Bullet.

If everything this man said was true…if the Devil's Bullet existed, and if Air really was a Ghost, then…

"Let me tell you something," Kaisei said, pulling Athly away from her thoughts.

"Ah…!"

"Ghosts give rise to wars. A clash between Ghosts almost always results in the death of countless bystanders. That stands for the girl you erased, Kirlilith, as well. Her chance encounter with Air resulted in the destruction of Leminus."

"No way!"

Leminus was Athly's hometown, as well as the place Kirlilith destroyed when she killed her parents. Whenever she heard that name, her vision turned red. Leminus was simply that deeply rooted in her heart, since it gave her a reason to fight.

Resentment bubbled up in her. And while she tried to repress the emotion, her poker face cracked, revealing her internal conflict.

Kaisei keenly noticed it and asked, "Oh? What's the matter?"

"Leminus was…my hometown."

“Oh, I see. You have that in common, too? I suppose that’s your reason, then.”

“Reason for what?”

“Hating the Ghosts.”

“I don’t…”

I don’t hate them…

“I’d be surprised if you didn’t,” Kaisei replied, cocking his head. “The people of that town died because of a battle between Ghosts. Sure, Ghosts are created by this unending war, so they’re unfortunate bystanders in a way, but that doesn’t excuse their malicious acts.”

“……”

Hatred. That single, simple word summed up the undying anger in Athly’s heart perfectly. And a new flame ignited in her chest now that she knew a clash between Ghosts had caused the carnage in her hometown.

A clash between Ghosts… That meant there were two present in Leminus. One of them was Kirlilith, the instigator, while the other one was…

“The Ghost, Air, is equally responsible, wouldn’t you agree?” Kaisei said.

…that mysterious girl. If it weren’t for her, both Leminus and her parents would still exist. Or that was what Kaisei seemed to believe, at least.

Ah…!

An intense black fire burned in Athly. It felt far smaller than her hatred of Kirlilith, but the new embers threatened a girl she’d known for quite a while—Air.

If only she hadn’t been there… If only she didn’t exist… If only she didn’t have the power of the Devil’s Bullet… My parents are dead…and it’s all her fault!

“I wish you could see the expression on your face,” Kaisei said, laughing. But he wasn’t hinting at anything she didn’t already know. Athly could feel the contortion of her face; she would have refused to look in the mirror.

“But, well…,” Kaisei mumbled and rose to his feet, signaling that their little chat had come to an end. “Only what comes next truly matters. It might be a little late to ask this, but what’s your name?”

“…Athly,” she replied, finding no reason to lie.

“Athly, huh?” Kaisei muttered as he nodded. “Care to join me?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea, I’m not proposing to you or anything,” Kaisei said, cracking a smile. “I’m scouting you, as a soldier. You’ve got plenty of reasons to fight, and people who have an advantage against Ghosts are hard to come by, so I don’t want to miss this chance. Most people who learn about them get killed, after all.”

Athly remained silent. She knew Kaisei's suggestion wasn't innocuous at all. He'd asked her to defect. To cast aside everything she'd achieved in the East. And he expected her to do that because of the intense hatred in her heart.

He expected her to betray her comrades because she despised Ghosts.

"……"

It was a proposition she should've laughed off. Defection was punishable by death, so she had to turn him down flat. And yet, she said nothing.

"……"

"You're not refusing right away. Wonderful. Well, this is fine. I don't need an immediate answer," Kaisei stated as he threw the pistol in his hand toward her.

A model that wasn't used in either the East or the West landed near her feet.

"What's this?"

"You can keep it. Carry it with you, just in case. It'll help you meet me again."

"…I don't want it."

"Oh, come on. You can never be too prepared. And if you really don't need it, just throw it away… Right, before I forget, let me tell you something else." Kaisei decided to tell her one final thing before wrapping up their chance meeting. "In a few days, the Harborant military will launch an attack on the capital of O'ltmenia."

"Ah…!"

"They'll fight to capture the capital and conclude the fourth war. I don't know which side you'll be on when that battle takes place, but…"

"…I do hope you'll stand by me all the same."

And with that cryptic comment, Kaisei boarded his Exelia.

"Good-bye, Athly. I hope to see you again soon."

The quiet hum of the Exelia's engine echoed through the silent forest. It carried Kaisei away, disappearing into the woods. And Athly didn't give chase. Instead, she simply stood there, gazing at the pistol he left behind.

Afterward, Athly headed back to where Rain slept. Her state of mind, however, was nowhere near as calm as when she'd left. Kaisei's words were still rushing through her head. Their exchange had only lasted five minutes, but it felt like she'd entered a whole new world in that time.

Air is…a Ghost… And a Ghost was a supernatural and immensely powerful being who wreaked havoc on the battlefield.

Kaisei had revealed the mysterious girl's hidden secrets. Athly didn't want to believe it, and her mind even actively tried to deny the possibility, but the evidence lined up too well.

Plus, she already had definitive proof. The silver bullet she'd once used was by no means circumstantial evidence. In fact, it served as a grim reminder that others wielded its deadly power.

Athly couldn’t be sure who had it, but there was a 90 percent probability that Air was a Ghost, so it was probably her.

Ah…!

A surge of heat rushed through Athly’s body at the thought. A swirl of emotions, of anger and agony, took over her mind as the image of her hometown and parents burning rose before her. She desperately tried to suppress the hatred she felt, but it had already taken root in the core of her being.

She no longer felt any friendship or camaraderie toward Air. A battle between Ghosts had cost Athly everything she had; only anger remained in her heart. But the more she thought of Air, the more she thought of someone else, too.

Rain… Her old friend, her comrade who’d once formed an Exelia pair with her, who now seemed deeply involved with Air. Ever since Air had arrived at Alestra Academy, the two had spent all their time together.

This whole time, Athly had been unaware what they were up to, but Kaisei’s words changed everything. She finally realized the truth.

Rain is cooperating with a Ghost!

No, I can’t think about that…

That line of thought scared her, sending a shiver through her body. She understood that the moment she acknowledged it as fact, she and Rain would become enemies. Rain would become a target she had to eliminate, a subject of her revenge.

I don’t want that! Athly firmly rejected that idea. She couldn’t, *wouldn’t*, bring herself to shoot Rain. Unfortunately, the rage in her heart refused to let up.

But if Rain’s cooperating with a Ghost who stole everything from me, I’ll have to…

If it came down to it, she would allow the dark emotion in her heart to hunt him down as well. An emotion that was, in essence, similar to what she felt when she’d shot Kirlilith.

It was white-hot rage that easily overwhelmed her normal sensibility, that told to take the lives of her enemies.

No, what am I thinking?! I have to stop! Athly shook her head to clear her mind. Her thoughts had run wild, and she knew it. She had to calm down.

Sure, she had near definite proof about Air, but the same wasn’t true for Rain. And even putting that aside, he had no clear motive for working with her.

As she calmed down, other theories floated to the forefront of her mind. True, Rain shared some sort of secret with Air, but that didn’t mean they were equals. For all Athly knew, she’d coerced him into a relationship…

That’s right…

That seemed like a plausible explanation; Air might not have even told him about the Devil’s Bullet. And if that was the case, then he wasn’t

someone Athly had to kill. In fact, she had to save him from the evil Ghost's clutches.

But if…*if*…Rain willingly cooperated with Air and wielded the Devil's Bullet…

…No. That's enough thinking.

There was a limit to theories. She'd thought about it long enough, which meant she had to go confirm her suspicions.

She had to figure out if Rain was truly on Air's side.

Rain…

Athly had returned to their Exelia's position. She'd gone straight from there into the woods, where she met Kaisei, so it only took her a few minutes to return. Nothing had changed. The Exelia was parked in the middle of the open area, and Rain still sat in the gunner's seat.

She saw his face from behind the windshield. Rain seemed fast asleep.

……

Athly took off her shoes to silence her footsteps, then walked over to the Exelia, where she carefully and quietly climbed up to the gunner's seat. Rain was still asleep. After fighting all day long, he'd been woken up to go on this patrol. The buildup of fatigue had dulled his usually cautious nature, so sleep overtook him all too easily.

Athly looked down, her gaze falling on the pistol attached to Rain's waist. It was his personal gun, a revolver he always carried with him into battle.

……

Athly wanted to believe he was innocent. Even if he shared a secret with Air, she wanted to unconditionally trust him, to believe he didn't willingly cooperate with a Ghost that caused chaos. But a calmer, more rational part of her mind realized that this was wishful thinking, an illusion produced by her weak heart's desire. And so…

I…

…she had to make sure. She had to make sure Rain hadn't decided to work with Ghosts. That he'd never used something as vile as the Devil's Bullet. Athly reached out for the holster at Rain's waist. Once she bent over, it was easily in reach.

……

She steeled her resolve and brought her fingers to the clasp, using her index finger to undo it. The moment she did, there was a *click*, and it was far louder than she'd expected. Athly glanced at Rain with fear in her eyes, but his eyelids merely quivered. Luckily, he hadn't woken up.

It's fine. There's no need to panic.

Athly's fingers closed around the pistol's grip, and she drew it out of its holster. The pistol didn't make any sound as it left its place, which greatly relieved her.

She'd successfully drawn it. Now all she had to do was check the bullets in the cylinder to figure out Rain's allegiance—to learn if he'd used that

horrible power to erase people from history. Athly's finger moved over the revolver to check when suddenly…

"What are you doing?"

…a hand grasped her neck with the strength of a vise.

"Gaaah!"

She didn't even need to check. She immediately recognized Rain's voice.

"…Athly?" Rain asked. He'd finally realized who he grabbed. Apparently, he'd simply noticed that someone had taken his pistol and instinctively went on the offensive.

The two of them were sitting opposite each other, so they were looking directly at each other. Despite being groggy from his deep sleep, Rain immediately recognized her. However…

"Give it back."

…he still didn't release his grip on her neck. He'd attacked her on instinct, but he didn't promptly apologize with a smile and let go. His grip remained firm, as if he'd mentally prepared himself to kill her if he needed to.

But then again, she was holding his weapon, so that came as no surprise. Rain clearly saw his revolver in her hands.

"That's mine. Give it back, now," Rain said, reaching toward her with his free hand.

A tense atmosphere settled over the Exelia, and Athly knew her life could hinge on this decision.

"Wh-why…?"

"Because it's mine. Do I need any other reason?"

"……" Athly fell silent, refusing to hand it over.

Rain kept his grip on the back of her neck and said, "C'mon, let's stop this… Just hand it over already, dammit!"

Deciding he needed to resort to drastic measures, Rain grabbed Athly's right wrist. And then…

Ah…!

…Athly jerked her arm away to shake off Rain's grip, banging the pistol hard against the Exelia's fuselage in the process. The shock ran through the pistol, breaking the cylinder open and scattering…

No…

…*silver* bullets. Multiple silver shells reflected the moonlight as they spilled to the ground. No regular bullet was that color.

"Noooooooooooooooooo!" Athly screamed, her cries echoing through the woods.

That was the one thing she hadn't wanted to see. The silver bullets were unique enough that she couldn't mistake them for anything else, so she had no way to justify this.

There was no longer any room for doubt. Rain had decided to work with a Ghost. He'd used a weapon that wiped people out of existence, and his pistol proved it.

“Aaah, aaah…”

Silver bullets clinked to the ground, ruthlessly affirming the truth. Her friend was a target of her revenge.

“Aaah, aaaaaaaaah…” Athly had completely lost her composure. She stared at the scattered bullets in shock before shaking off Rain and jumping away, fleeing in a panic.

“Athly!” Rain called.

But Athly ran, ignoring him. She sprinted in hopes of running away from the truth and the terror. Her legs carried her into the woods, and she wasn’t coming back.

As soon as she’d spotted the bullet of Oblivion, she’d fled. And that established a single, indisputable fact.

Athly Magmet had abandoned her duties as a soldier and run away. Desertion in the line of duty was an act punishable by death. From that moment on, she was marked as a deserter.

5. CONFLAGRATION

Rain still couldn't quite fathom what had just happened.

"Athly!"

He may have fallen asleep, but he wasn't particularly careless. He'd only taken a short, appropriate rest. However, his sleep had deepened more than he'd expected, and when he woke up, he saw someone taking his pistol. Since the pistol contained the Devil's Bullet, he'd instinctively attacked and grabbed them by the neck, intending to snap it.

Unfortunately, he'd hesitated upon realizing the person in question was Athly.

"Where'd she go?!"

Athly had run into the forest so suddenly that he'd lost sight of her.

"Shit…!"

She'd left behind the Exelia, and while Rain could manage basic driving, he was by no means skilled enough to catch up to a person fleeing in this darkness. And besides, he didn't know why Athly had run away in the first place. Sure, he'd grabbed her neck pretty hard, but he couldn't imagine Athly screaming and having a hysterical fit over that. She was a soldier, after all, so she knew the implications of holding a weapon in front of someone.

That act of violence couldn't have been the reason. Something else had made her lose her composure. And all that came to mind…were the silver bullets scattered at his feet.

Did seeing these make her panic like that?

The bullets had a peculiar color to them, but other than that, they looked normal. Only people who'd seen the Devil's Bullet's power in action would've thought them odd.

…It can't be!

Only someone who'd recognize it as the Devil's Bullet would've reacted like that, so…

How would Athly know…? And why'd she run off like that?

…the answer was simple. Somehow, Athly knew about the power of those bullets.

"What do I do…?"

Rain had no way to question Athly now that she was gone, but he certainly couldn't allow her to roam free. He couldn't afford to let the secret of the Devil's Bullet leak. Its unparalleled, mysterious power was Rain's greatest weapon on the battlefield.

He had to protect that secret at all costs, which meant he had to find Athly. But by the time he'd come to that conclusion, Rain finally realized something.

Assuming I do catch Athly, what next?

Ask her not to tell anyone? Have her join their crusade?

Those notions seemed absurd. The Devil's Bullet was a secret that had to be safeguarded, and letting Athly learn about it was a huge misstep. She'd lost her parents to the war, in a battle between Ghosts that involved Air. If she learned that, Athly would never forgive Air.

Rain realized that deep down, but even still, he felt driven to catch Athly. He knew he had to permanently silence her if he caught her, but he ran after her all the same.

What am I thinking?! Rain was dumbfounded. The fact that he'd thought of killing her, even subconsciously, shook him to his core, forcing his legs to stop.

A layer of clouds hung over him, darkening the forest as if to match the silence enveloping it. And the only thing Rain could do was gaze into that darkness…

Three days had passed. O'ltmenia's capital, Alestra, prepared to hold an annual festival. A national holiday was celebrated with a three-day festival that spanned the entire capital.

Originally, it was a form of prayer for a good harvest. But ever since Alestra had developed into an industrial city, it had become a fun festival marked by large feasts. O'ltmenia remained in the middle of war, so the risk of invasion loomed, but people set aside their anxieties to enjoy themselves for once.

"Your ID tag's been confirmed. Head for hangar number 5, please."

Rain had to guard the freight heading into the capital. When the cadets were first assigned the task, they'd heard it would be an armed escort, but on reaching their destination, they realized that it was mostly carrying in supplies and directing freight trains to their allotted hangars.

In other words, they'd been assigned chores. Rain didn't complain, though, since every department seemed shorthanded.

Since it was a festival, much more cargo than usual had arrived at the capital, so security couldn't keep up. Left with no choice, they'd asked the cadets to go on patrol and help manage the inspections as well. Everyone acknowledged this was something of an emergency and tacitly agreed to the unusual arrangement.

As the freight trains arrived, Rain would inspect their ID tags and direct them to the hangar listed. Nearly fifty trains had arrived during just the morning hours. And since they were in the middle of a war, all trains, without exception, were subjected to rigorous checks.

Four hours after he'd started working, Rain began to run out of energy.

"Morning team, take a break," instructed their commanding officer.

Rain and the other members of the morning team stopped working at last. They exchanged grumbled complaints about how tired they felt, then took the rations and water provided and entered their break.

The light meal wasn't particularly tasty, but it did come in plentiful amounts, making it a perfect fit for the situation. Rain, however, didn't touch his food or water.

……

He didn't eat anything else, either. He remained empty-handed as he walked away from his fellow workers and headed toward a platform that allowed him to look down at the checkpoint.

As soon as Rain climbed up to the top of the platform, he sat down, dangling his feet off the edge to relax. There was no one else around. The spot was built to serve as a lookout position for scouts, meaning no one usually came near here. He didn't do anything, though. He simply watched the passing trains and got lost in thought.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh…?"

When those words reached his ears, he felt someone press down on his head.

"From the looks of it, I'd say you skipped another meal."

Something rested atop his head. And when Rain tilted it to the side in confusion, a red apple fell into his hands. Looking up, he fixed his gaze on a silver-haired girl.

"At least eat something," she told him grumpily.

"Air…"

"You're working pretty hard today, huh?" she said, obviously insincere. And honestly, that dry sarcasm suited Air.

Instead of the Alestra Academy uniform or her combat attire, she had on a casual outfit. It was still the cold season, but she wore a short skirt that prioritized mobility. Unlike Rain, she had the day off to celebrate the festival, which made her sudden appearance odd.

"Why are you here?"

"I've already sampled most of the food there, and walking around alone is no fun," she replied. Then she pointed at the apple in Rain's hands and said, "Think you can eat that for me?"

"……"

"I went out of my way to pick the best one I could find."

"…Wow, you're looking out for me now? This really is a special day."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"That this festival's bringing out the best in you."

"I look out for you all the time! Ugh, look, if you're not going to eat it, just give it back," Air said, extending a palm toward him impatiently.

"No, I'll try it. Thanks."

Rain evaded her fingers and bit down on the apple. The suppleness of the skin was evidence that it was most definitely fresh; O'ltmenian markets

were overflowing with fruit at this time of year. Some entire freight trains exclusively carried apples, even. It was the peak of their harvest season, so they tasted extra delicious. As further proof, Air, who had an insatiable sweet tooth, had picked them out specifically.

But even so, Rain couldn't stomach it.

"Ngh… Ugh, urk…"

He felt hungry, but after a few bites, Rain started vomiting.

"…Are you okay?"

"Yeah…," Rain muttered, still overcome with nausea.

Dammit!

Despite how sick he felt, he realized he had to eat something, so he slowly took a few more bites from the apple to placate his empty stomach.

Air stared at him silently as he did, then eventually asked, "Is it still bothering you?"

"……"

"Have you made up your mind?"

"About what…?"

"Athly, of course," Air answered concisely. She was cutting to the chase.

"Look, Rain, I'm not going to tell you what to think. This isn't my choice to make," Air spoke calmly, but her words came from a cold and rational understanding of the situation. "But you should decide quickly. The longer you draw this out, the more people you endanger."

What should I do…? Rain felt conflicted. And that conflict had plagued him during every waking moment of the last three days.

Three days ago, Athly Magmet had become a deserter. She'd seen Rain's silver bullets, lost her temper, and disappeared without a trace. That left Rain with a choice. He had to decide whether to report her desertion to the eastern army or not, since she would be treated drastically different based on his choice.

However, the biggest issue was why she'd fled in the line of duty. Somehow, Athly had learned of the Devil's Bullet. And seeing that bullet in Rain's pistol had made her flee. He couldn't tell the army about his secret weapon, of course, so he'd lied and said they'd gotten separated in the middle of the operation.

And yet, they'd still sent a search party out to find her, which marked her as a criminal. She'd disappeared in the middle of a military operation, so the law dictated that she would be charged with desertion under enemy fire, even if no enemies were present.

Athly had been branded a criminal…and the punishment awaiting her was death.

The weight of that choice tormented Rain. His personal feelings and cold, hard logic constantly clashed in his mind. He had difficulty sleeping, and the stress had robbed him of his appetite.

"I think you should report it," Air advised him.

Three days ago, shortly before Athly parted ways with him, she'd apparently had a run-in with Air. They happened to get in the bath together, and Athly had hinted that she knew about the Devil's Bullet.

"Why would Athly do that in the bath, of all places?"

"I doubt she meant to. It probably just slipped out."

"You sure?"

"If I was in her shoes, I'd have at least brought a gun with me. Wouldn't want to get erased while questioning the suspect, you know?"

Good point…

Athly had to have known that questioning Air was dangerous. Coming to the interrogation armed would make sense, but she'd been empty-handed. That meant she didn't have definitive proof of Air's guilt. She'd simply asked due to the doubts in her mind.

One thing still made no sense, however.

"How'd Athly even find out about the Devil's Bullet?"

They'd kept its existence a complete secret. And by the bullet's very nature, no one but Rain and Air should've noticed the shifting of the world.

"I have a theory," Air said. "I think she used it at one point."

"So you're saying—?"

"Yeah. She must've shot Kirlilith."

Early on in their partnership, they had fought Kirlilith Lambert, a Ghost who wielded a bullet that delivered unconditional death. But following their battle, someone else had shot her with the Devil's Bullet.

Thus far, they'd failed to identify her killer, but the answer suddenly seemed clear.

Athly had shot Kirlilith, which had granted her the ability to notice the shifting of the world. She'd witnessed every single change in reality Air and Rain had caused.

"She used the Devil's Bullet, which led her to suspect that we were working together. Still, she couldn't be completely sure, so she let that slip in front of me."

"……"

"Anyway, letting her stay on the run is too dangerous."

"…I know."

As long as she remained alive, Athly could expose the power of the Devil's Bullet. Rain knew they had to keep that from happening, but no matter how hard he thought, he couldn't find a peaceful way to end things. They had to kill Athly…

"Tch…"

…but Rain refused to accept the answer that had been tormenting him over the last three days. He couldn't eat or sleep from the stress. And worse yet, his inability to find a peaceful solution whittled down his mental fortitude.

“……” Air looked at Rain’s pained expression as she sat by his side. She silently peered at his face, then eventually decided that Rain wouldn’t be able to think things through on his own for much longer.

“Hey, Rain.”

“What?”

“Give me your hand.”

“…My hand?”

“Just hold it up.”

“Why…?”

What’s that gonna do?

Rain didn’t understand, but he followed her instructions all the same. In response, Air held up her own right hand and interlocked their fingers.

It was a gesture commonly associated with lovers, which made Rain freeze.

“What do you think?” Air asked.

“A-about what…?”

“My hand.”

Rain fell silent, feeling stumped.

“It’s small, isn’t it?”

“Oh, uh, well…yeah?”

“But when it holds a gun, even this little hand can kill many people.”

“That’s…true.”

“People underestimate me because of my looks. In fact, I’ve turned the tables on countless enemies because they assumed I was helpless. It’s almost funny how humans tend to base their opinions of people on appearance.” As Air spoke, their fingers still enmeshed, Rain understood what she’d been trying to convey.

“You’re saying I shouldn’t let my feelings cloud my judgment.”

“Exactly. In the end, you can never truly predict someone’s actions. I’ve seen far too many people suffer because they based their decisions on groundless assumptions.”

In other words, sparing Athly would be careless. Air claimed that the idea that someone else would never hurt you—never betray you—was foolish.

“It’s fine to trust people, but that doesn’t mean you can abandon all logical thought. And honestly, it’s obvious that you’re just letting your own selfish wishes toward Athly dictate your actions.”

“…I know.”

She gave him a clear warning, which was rather unusual. She rarely spoke her mind, which gave those words extra weight.

The fact that he hadn’t reported Athly’s desertion was wrong.

“All right,” Rain finally said, having accepted her words. “I’ve decided. I’ll do it. I’ll go tell the army that Athly’s disappearance was desertion.”

“I see,” Air replied, her expression clouding over slightly.

That surprised Rain. He’d expected her to be happy he’d heeded her advice, but her expression had grown bitter and rueful instead. Rain couldn’t tell if those were her true feelings, since he often found himself struggling to understand people. However, she had tightened her grip on his fingers considerably.

Two rails passed through the western checkpoint where Rain was stationed. The passing freight trains moved one by one along them, separated by a tall wall, which made it a functional checkpoint. Charging through it was almost impossible, especially in the middle of a war.

The checkpoint had a drawbridge in front of the barrier to guard against attacks from enemy operatives and armed forces. It was usually lowered to allow passage, but they could lift it during emergencies, blocking the rails. If an enemy attacked, they’d pull the chains and prevent them from crossing, thereby shoring up their defenses.

In addition to that, many Exelias were stationed there, and several dozen people, including mages dispatched by the army and cadets like Rain, occupied the checkpoint. If anything happened, they’d be able to function as a platoon to guard the city.

“When does your break end?”

“I’ve still got another hour.”

“That’s a pretty long break,” Air replied, then paused for thought. “Guess I’ll stick around until it’s over.”

She’d apparently decided to remain on the platform with him. The place was made for scouts, so its only redeeming feature was the nice view it provided. Wind blew through the platform ruthlessly, buffeting them in an area that had nothing in the way of a guardrail. If someone slipped over the edge, they’d suffer a sixty-foot fall.

Rain didn’t want to move much due to the danger. Air, by contrast, bounced around the platform with unusual vigor to take in the sights. Looking down, she saw trains passing through the checkpoint, while looking behind them offered a view of the festivities.

Rain felt detached from the very idea of festivals, so he couldn’t get into the same mindset as the celebrating citizens. Over the last few days—no, ever since he got the Devil’s Bullet—he’d been pressing forward without a chance to truly rest. And his heart had been whittled down as a result, little by little, beneath his notice.

The matter with Athly had exacerbated his worries…and Rain couldn’t deny that it’d shocked him to his core. She had not only discovered the Devil’s Bullet but used it as well. And now he had to capture and silence her.

Air looked down at the rails while Rain looked in the opposite direction, which gave him a good view of the capital.

……

The town bustled with activity as the celebrations reached their peak. The festival lasted three days, but it was always liveliest on the first. Despite the afternoon sun illuminating the city, people lit bonfires and shot pretty fireworks into the sky.

Come nightfall, even more would light fires and send up fireworks. It was customary to do so, as the fires were considered guideposts for the gods, a means to thank them for their protection. But of course, that was only part of the reason. The other half was that the townsfolk truly enjoyed the sight.

Rain had once shared in that belief. He'd participated in every festival since moving to the capital and shot fireworks…with Athly by his side.

"……"

They'd stuck by each other since enrolling in Alestra Academy, so they'd taken in the festivities together the past three years. Rain could never forget those moments. The memories would never fade. Each year, he took part in the festival with Athly to clear his mind of the fires of war that threatened to burn his heart. Frankly, those peaceful memories served as a crucial anchor that kept him sane.

Unfortunately, this year was different. This year, there was no Athly.

I…

Had Rain truly chosen the correct path? He'd always assumed so, but perhaps he'd drifted in a terrible direction. After all, he had no way of proving he'd made the right decisions.

I might've caused the worst possible outcome… What if he'd hit the point of no return that led to their doom?

As soon as that thought crossed his mind, he heard Air mutter something.

"Huh…?" she'd said in response to something happening down at the rails. "This isn't good."

"What's wrong?"

"That train over there's been waiting for an inspection, but it hasn't moved."

"Wait, seriously?"

Only a few trains could be inspected at a time, so the incoming ones had to line up and wait for their turn. The rails were especially congested because of the festival, but one among them didn't seem to care. Said car hadn't budged an inch since it'd arrived.

Most cars in the lines advanced as inspections in front of them finished, but that one refused to, even though it should have wanted to get as close as possible. And as more and more cars got inspected, a six-hundred-foot gap had formed between it and the checkpoint.

"…Maybe their engine malfunctioned?"

If their engine had stopped while they waited, they naturally wouldn't have been able to proceed. Though, in that case, it needed to be towed to make room for the traffic behind them. No one had disembarked from the stopped car to report any issues, however, which was what alarmed Air…as well as several inspectors at the checkpoint. Since it packed the horsepower needed to tow it, an Exelia approached the car to check.

The area between the train and the checkpoint was flat ground, so the Exelia closed the gap quickly. Unfortunately, when it got within one hundred and fifty feet…

…it exploded, unleashing a flurry of flames and a deafening roar.

"What…?!"

The sight Rain and Air saw from the platform was visible to everyone at the checkpoint as well. When the Exelia approached the train, a barrage of Bullet Magic flew out from the first car.

That barrage ruthlessly ripped through the unit faster than its manipulator could dodge, and the bullets that missed their mark hit the checkpoint's wall instead.

Shit!

The blast created shock waves that Rain felt all the way up on the platform. Looking down, he saw that the checkpoint had gone up in flames. They were under attack…and this wasn't an act of vandalism or terrorism.

The enemy had launched an organized attack. As that realization struck Rain, the situation worsened. Ten western AT3 units sprang out of the stationary train cars, greatly outnumbering the Exelias in the checkpoint's garrison.

"Gatekeep!" Rain leaned in from the edge of the platform and yelled at the person in the checkpoint below. "Raise the bridge! Hurry, before they make it in!"

If they could reel back the chains, the drawbridge would both remove the rails and form a new section of the wall, blocking the enemy's advance. However, the gatekeepers had panicked because of the surprise attack. They only snapped out of it and started reeling in the chains once Rain called out to them, which left an exploitable gap.

They won't make it.

The enemy had already closed most of the distance. If even one of them made it inside, the bridge would be destroyed. It was weak to attacks from the inside, after all.

"Fuck!" Rain exclaimed, realizing the drawbridge wouldn't stop them.

There were ten enemy Exelias out there, and if they got into the capital, the losses would be catastrophic. Looking down, he saw the other soldiers running around like headless chickens. The mages stationed to defend the place had failed to respond in time. Their Exelias weren't even turned on, and the situation no longer allowed them to shoot any suppressive fire.

…Guess I have to handle this.

Rain took hold of the rifle strapped to his back and squatted down. Then he fixed the barrel against his knee and shoulder to aim at an enemy Exelia.

Twenty seconds… That's all the time I need.

He needed to stall the enemy for that long. That way, the gatekeepers could finish reeling in the drawbridge. But that meant he had to force back ten Exelias at once, even though shooting down just one would've been a miraculous feat. He needed to pull off the impossible with essentially zero margins for error.

"I'll handle the right side."

Luckily, Rain wasn't alone.

"Air…"

"We'll shoot them at the same time," Air said as she assumed the same stance as Rain. "If we each land two accurate shots, we can stall them with the explosions."

Rain understood that missing that shot would result in the slaughter of thousands.

"—Now!" Air gave the signal, and Rain pulled the trigger.

Bullet Magic capable of reducing even the largest of trees to splinters flew toward the rails the Exelia were on. Rain hadn't aimed at the units themselves but at the ground near them. His goal was to create a large enough blast to stall all ten Exelia, so he didn't worry about killing any enemies. However, he and Air could only manage four shots in total with the time they had, which meant their timing and aim had to be perfect. And even then, they needed a great deal of luck as well. Thankfully…

"…I was worried for a second there, but we made it," Air muttered.

…within several seconds, the four shots they'd fired hit the mark. The sudden blasts directly in front of the rapidly moving Exelias forced them to brake, curbing their momentum.

The stalled group of Exelias immediately accelerated once more, but that momentary lag had changed everything. They charged forward, but when they got within one hundred feet of the entrance, the drawbridge rose with a rumbling roar. And once it began, it only took seconds for the gate to close with a thud and bar their path.

Rain felt all the tension drain from his body. He relaxed his posture and let go of his rifle; his heart was beating so fast, he thought it might burst.

They had successfully delayed an enemy invasion. But unfortunately, they had no room to breathe. After all, the enemy still threatened to beat down their gates.

Rain called out his partner's name. "Air."

"I'm on it," Air replied as she nodded back toward him.

The two of them ran down the platform and into the checkpoint's interior. But on reaching the command station, they found themselves in a veritable hell.

"Ugh…"

Countless bodies littered the floor in a gruesome sight. Bullet Magic from the AT3s had struck the checkpoint's interior, causing severe damage.

Flames burned all around them, while they could hear screams and moans from other places nearby. Most of it came from noncombatants, which was understandable.

Dammit… How many people died here?!

The dispatched soldiers and cadets had mostly maintained their composure and split up to either evacuate the noncombatants or assume battle positions. Rain and Air chose to join the latter group.

Their side had eight mages who could use Bullet Magic. All of them cautiously peeked through the iron gate's gaps, where they saw the ten Exelias from earlier assuming a formation that allowed them to move quickly if they were fired upon.

"Why aren't they falling back…?" Air mumbled to herself. Rain had asked himself the exact same question.

The West had started their surprise attack by easily destroying the unit that had carelessly approached to check on them. They'd also fired a barrage of Bullet Magic at the checkpoint, effectively crippling the East's ability to function properly.

Had it not been for Rain and Air, they would've broken through the gate, but excuses like that didn't matter. They'd failed all the same, so why hadn't they started retreating?

The drawbridge had lifted without any of the enemy units getting in, which meant they no longer had a way to get through the checkpoint. Their other options were the north or south gates, which were miles away. And yet, the ten Exelias simply drove in circles…

"They're waiting for something."

"Oh?"

"I'm not sure what, but they're moving like a unit with an objective to fulfill."

Air's keen observation skills told her that the enemy had a specific goal in mind, but she had no way to narrow down the possible options. The two of them pondered over the matter as the two eastern Exelias in the checkpoint roared to life. One unit had been destroyed earlier, but these remained operational. The commanding officer had already sent a report to HQ, so their only choice was to hold out for reinforcements.

"There's no telling how long it'll take for aid to get here. The emergency passages are in use already, which means it'll take a while for Exelias to get here."

Had it not been the day of the festival, Exelias or extra personnel could have hurried over from nearby garrisons in less than five minutes. But that was the one day where that wasn't possible. All of the capital's roads were clogged with people and goods because of the festival.

Hold on… Rain's thoughts ground to a halt. His intuition, sharpened due to immense pressure, screamed at him.

The enemy intentionally *picked today to attack! It's so obvious!* Rain realized the enemy had knowingly decided to attack on the day of the festival. With that in mind, it made sense why they'd targeted the poorly guarded western gate. It was a position far from military HQ, meaning it would take ages for reinforcements to arrive. They'd isolated the best time and location possible, then gone after it.

Honestly, their whole assault seemed so meticulously planned that it would've been weird if they didn't have a backup option. After all, there was no guarantee that they'd make it through the gate. Blitzes were prone to failure, which made retreat rather common. No intelligent force would just keep driving around in circles. And yet, that was exactly what they were doing.

"What do we do?" Rain asked.

"Well, it's not like we've got a whole lot of options," Air snapped back at him.

If they insisted on sticking to that position, the East's only recourse was to gun them down. However, just as Rain started wondering why they'd stuck around…

"They're coming!"

…a scout raised his voice. The very next moment, a blinding flash erupted outside the gate. Countless luminous points unleashed bursts of dizzying light that crashed against the drawbridge. The enemy had unleashed a fusillade of Bullet Magic.

Intense vibrations and a deafening blast reverberated through the checkpoint's interior, shaking the ground under their feet like an earthquake.

Ugh…!

The shock waves were overwhelming. Rain and Air had grabbed on to the wall, but even they staggered back. The iron gate proved sturdy enough to withstand the attack, but that didn't keep them entirely safe.

"They're trying to brute-force their way in."

"Yeah. But luckily, it's not really working."

The wall formed by the drawbridge was exceptionally sturdy, so even a barrage of Bullet Magic wasn't enough to break it. It had taken some damage, but it stood firm. It'd take another hundred shots like that to crack a hole in it.

The enemy's attack only served to prove that they were safe inside the checkpoint, so all they had to do was hole up in there and wait for reinforcements. They lacked the numbers and firepower to push back their enemy, but the wall in front of them acted as their final bastion.

Unfortunately, the force sent to invade the capital had no intention of letting up.

"That's…"

After the shots ceased, Rain took another look at the enemy's behavior.

The units circling outside the gate stopped, and the soldiers inside the checkpoint rose to the challenge, holding up their rifles and taking aim from the lookout windows.

When they got a better view of outside, they saw a new threat. Namely, the fake train that'd carried the ten Exelias. It had a false identification plate on it that said it was an eastern train and three containers that the hostile Exelias had burst out of.

Or, at least, that was what they'd initially noticed, but on closer inspection, Rain realized something terrifying. Only *two* of the containers had opened thus far.

Ah…!

Rain held up his rifle, preparing to shoot whatever rushed out of the container. A thousand feet separated them, but that was still within the range of his Bullet Magic.

Still, he'd reacted far too late. The moment he fixed his sights on the container, it burst open. A pillar of flames billowed upward, accompanied by a rumbling blast. And it wasn't because Rain, or anyone else for that matter, had attacked the container. The unit stored within it had blown its way out.

The blast released a shock wave and immense heat that no ordinary Exelia could've withstood, but *that* unit remained undeterred. No matter how anyone bombarded it, *that* unit wouldn't so much as budge.

"The Razor-Edge Model…!"

A pitch-black Exelia crept out of the flames, standing twice as tall and carrying fifty times the weight of its peers. The unit's massive frame plunged out of the freight train, its four wheels landing on the ground.

Time slowed to a crawl in Rain's addled mind as that entire sequence of events unfolded. Frankly, it felt similar to how things slowed down when he was plummeting from a great height. And as soon as Rain snapped back to the real world, the Razor-Edge Model accelerated, achieving a speed that didn't suit its massive form.

"What?!"

The giant Exelia sped toward the iron gate, crossing the distance in mere seconds. Rain immediately realized its intentions and fired Bullet Magic at it. His destructive attack whizzed through the air, heading straight toward the black beast. However, the Razor-Edge Model easily avoided Rain's shot by changing its trajectory ever so slightly. And that was no coincidence. It'd executed a perfect dodge that relied entirely on the manipulator's skills.

Seeing that, Rain knew that the person onboard the Razor-Edge Model was far more skilled than anyone else he'd seen handle it.

Shit!

After dodging, it continued its charge toward the gate. A few seconds later, the other mages followed Rain's example and opened fire. Their Bullet Magic proved entirely ineffective, though. None of the blindly shot bullets hit their mark, so they did nothing to stop its advance.

“Get away from the gate!” someone ordered in a booming voice. And moments after that shout, an intense whirlwind blew everyone away.

The mages who’d failed to get away in time were torn apart like tissue paper as the Razor-Edge Model crashed through the drawbridge, scattering their bodies like pomegranate seeds and reducing them to red stains.

It was honestly hard to tell if the enemy had even intended to do that. Perhaps the Razor-Edge Model’s manipulator had simply gambled on getting through. Whatever the case, the facts remained clear. The die had been cast.

The western forces had succeeded. A decisive battle for the O’ltmenian capital, with the lives of tens of thousands of civilians hanging in the balance, was about to begin.

6. THE BATTLE FOR THE CAPITAL

“Ugh…!” Rain groaned. It felt as though every inch of his body had been mercilessly beaten with a bat. The pain was so intense that he wasn’t immediately sure all four of his limbs were still attached. But even so, he scrambled to his feet.

His surroundings had gone up in flames. The Razor-Edge Model’s charge had destroyed the wall, sending out shock waves that claimed the lives of most of the mages present.

Almost ten mages had died in the blink of an eye…and Rain had only managed to escape by the skin of his teeth. He didn’t get out unscathed, though.

Once he staggered to his feet, he realized a few of his ribs had shattered, and the faintest of breaths made pain course through his chest. Adrenaline had helped mitigate it somewhat, but it was still a near-fatal injury. Still, Rain firmly planted his feet on the ground and stood upright.

I have to hurry…!

The western units had broken through the wall. The Razor-Edge Model rushed into the city with ten AT3s in tow, firing indiscriminately all the while.

The number of casualties made what happened at the checkpoint seem insignificant. People walking through the streets on the day of the festival—innocent, naive victims—were slaughtered en masse by the sudden invaders.

Smoke rose in the distance, and the screams of thousands echoed in a swirl of chaos and panic. The citizens found themselves powerless to resist the ultimate combination in modern warfare, mage and Exelia. Sniping and surprise attacks had no hope of taking down such mighty opponents.

Of course, the second-generation Exelia stood head and shoulders above the rest. Rain couldn’t even imagine a way to fell that goliath. The Razor-Edge Model continuously bashed into crowds and facilities, leaving only death and destruction in its wake.

We have to stop that thing…! If we don’t, this whole city will be destroyed in a matter of hours!

Rain staggered forward through the smoke, trying to gather his vacant thoughts. Fortunately, at that exact moment, a certain silver-haired girl got to her feet.

“Air!”

“If nothing else, at least the two of us got out of that alive…”

They were the only survivors. Rain had taken the blast at full strength, but Air's small, light body had allowed her to roll away and avoid most of the impact. Her body was covered in scrapes, but that was all. She could still move, which meant the two of them could form a small tactical unit.

"What do we do?"

"We need to prioritize stopping the Razor-Edge Model," Air said. "Over ten Exelias have invaded the capital, so there's no point guarding the western gate. If we don't stop their advance, it'll only be a matter of time before the other walls fall."

The Razor-Edge Model was a second-generation Exelia, so barely anyone knew of its existence. But at the same time, only those who understood its true capabilities and had experience fighting it could possibly defeat it. And that meant everything rested on Rain's and Air's shoulders.

The Razor-Edge Model continued its stampede through the capital, massacring everything in its path. The carnage had to stop…and only they could put an end to it.

"Well, we're going to need an Exelia. Let's recover a unit that's been left behind."

Their objective now clear, Rain and Air ran to find an Exelia. As outmatched as their apparatus would be, they stood absolutely no chance without one.

Thankfully, it seemed the two Exelias from the checkpoint had remained intact. They'd gotten knocked back by the shock wave, but they still looked functional.

Rain and Air ran through the smoke-covered, corpse-ridden checkpoint to reach the Exelias. It was a horrific sight that made the two of them want to get out of there as soon as possible. However…

"You're laaate! Don't you think it's rude to keep me waiting so long?"

"Ah…!"

…a cold voice greeted them as they closed in on their destination. They stopped in their tracks and strained their eyes in hopes of spotting the man who'd spoken to them…only to find someone sitting atop one of the units. The sight made Rain's blood boil. He felt so angry that all sense of pain vanished from his mind.

"Kaisei…!"

"Oh, so you remember little old me? I'm honored."

Rain could never have forgotten him. The memory refused to fade from his mind. The man standing before them had become a permanent fixture in his thoughts.

"I believe this is the first time we've really met, Air," Kaisei stated flippantly.

"…I'd have preferred to meet under less chaotic circumstances," Air replied coldly.

"Ha-ha-ha, I can imagine. I'd have loved to have a nice, calm chat with you instead. But all this smoke and bloodshed feels more fitting, don't you

agree?” Kaisei cackled. But despite his listless attitude, everything about him set Rain on edge. The reason he’d suddenly appeared seemed painfully clear. He came to stop them, to neutralize a threat and aid in the invasion of the capital.

He’d probably planned everything out, and now that the vanguard had successfully broken through this checkpoint, he simply had to fulfill the next condition for their victory. Namely, removing Air, the key figure that could turn the tides, from the fight.

He’d come to remove the Devil’s Bullet from the equation. Air’s silver bullet could completely wipe this result from existence. If she shot the manipulator piloting the Razor-Edge Model, everything would change. And since Kaisei knew about that power, it only made sense that he’d personally come to stop them.

However, just as that thought crossed Rain’s mind…

“Oh, sorry. You can’t board this thing while I’m sitting on it, can you?”

…Kaisei hopped down from the Exelia as if he didn’t want to stop them. Then he lowered his hand, motioning Rain and Air to take it. That action made no sense if he was here to hinder them.

“…What are you doing?”

“I don’t plan on getting in your way. I just wanted to chat first, is all. Use this unit if you want… Though, I guess, you don’t need my permission or anything. It’s not mine.”

“You want to talk…?”

“Yep. Basically, I’m here to tell you that I’m not your enemy.”

“……”

“I figured if I didn’t tell you, you would get your objectives mixed up. As you’ve learned, I’m involved in the creation of the Ghosts. In fact, I hold a secret that lies at the very core of this system. But that doesn’t mean I’m involved with this fight in particular.”

“So, what? Are you trying to say we shouldn’t kill you because of that?”

“Your enemy is, without a doubt, the West,” Kaisei continued in a detached manner. “This is a war between two countries, not some well-orchestrated play. Two nations are scrambling for resources…and I’m only a bystander. Unlike the Ghosts, I don’t fight needlessly or trigger any tragedies. In fact, I can’t. All the people who were made into Ghosts were arrogant and overbearing by nature. Warriors that go around doing whatever suits their fancy are too much for me to handle. They simply live according to their own will, ignoring all common sense.”

There was no reason for Rain to believe anything Kaisei said. If anything, he was more inclined to actively doubt him. But for some reason, he couldn’t help but listen despite knowing he was likely lying.

“The invasion of the capital has nothing to do with me. It just gave me a good chance to talk to you two.”

“And why should we believe you?”

“I can’t really provide a good reason, but would you believe I’m not from Harborant?”

“What…?”

“I’m not affiliated with any country, really. I’m an outsider who doesn’t belong in the East or the West.”

When Rain first met him, Kaisei had captured a western officer and even had him bleeding out by his feet. But considering his actions thus far, it seemed clear that he didn’t support the East, either, which only left one option.

Kaisei didn’t care which side won this war.

“That’s why I’m trying to tell you not to forget your true enemies, the soldiers before your very eyes. I want you to understand the truth so that you will not waver. Nothing would be more pathetic than letting your doubts take over and dying a wretched death, wouldn’t you agree? I’m expecting a lot from you two. Your bullet has a way of causing unexpected twists and turns, which is pretty fun.”

After that, Kaisei turned away as if to make it clear that he’d said his piece.

You’re expecting a lot from us? Rain didn’t understand the situation at all. Had Kaisei truly traveled so far just to tell them that?

Whatever the case, they could deal with him later. Rain and Air couldn’t afford to squander more time. Even as they spoke, the Razor-Edge Model rushed through the heart of the city, destroying the East’s armored units left and right. They had so much information they needed to get out of Kaisei, but he wasn’t the priority. They had to stop the Razor-Edge Model as quickly as possible.

Rain was torn, but he knew they had to prioritize the lives of the innocent people who would be killed in the name of this meaningless conflict.

“…Dammit!” Rain cursed as he jumped into the Exelia Kaisei had abandoned. Air followed him and switched on the engine. They didn’t want to ignore that mysterious man, but they had no other choice.

“I want you to tell me one thing, Kaisei,” Air called after him. It was the first time she’d spoken; she likely had a lot to say but was intelligent enough to suppress her emotions. “Are you a Ghost, too?” she asked, condensing everything she wished to know down into a single question that could mean many things at once.

“Ha-ha-ha…,” Kaisei chuckled and hung his head. “I can say that, at the very least, I’m not the same kind of Ghost you, Kirlilith, and Deadrim are…”

After saying that, he raised his head, revealing a red-and-black-tinged left eye. It was wasp-hued, which was a phenomenon unique to Ghosts. The sight was so unexpected that Rain and Air couldn’t muster a reply. They’d seen that exact pattern in his left eye before, so they instantly recognized it.

“The Ema’s divinity…”

“That’s right. If I had to say…,” the man replied, “…I’m closer to what you are, Rain.”

The Razor-Edge Model headed southeast with ten western AT3s following in its footsteps. Their formation indicated that they’d already prepared for all-out war.

That just made it simpler for Rain and Air to pursue them, though. They hadn’t split their forces, which made it far easier to track them from a distance. The only issue was that all the areas they passed through were so thoroughly ruined that crossing them put a considerable strain on Rain. The sight of children’s small bodies was especially difficult to bear.

People walking through the streets had been ruthlessly and indiscriminately mowed down. There were more casualties than Rain was willing to accept. Thousands upon thousands had been thrown to the flames…and that knowledge made one thing clear: The slaughter would only end once someone stopped the Razor-Edge Model.

There had to be something, some way, to stop its rampage.

“We’re going to have to get closer to spot any clues,” Air said as she drove the Exelia. “And I can do that just fine. I’ll get us as close as possible, so I need you to find its weak point.”

“Does it even have one?”

That menacing machine appeared outright invincible.

“I’m sure one exists,” Air said, more optimistic than her partner. “The Razor-Edge Model might be powerful, but it’s surely lost some things in exchange. For example, it’s fast, but it can mostly only move in a straight line. That unit’s a highly specialized prototype, which means they didn’t focus on certain aspects. It’s got to have some kind of flaw.”

Air had only described a possibility, but that single strand of hope was all they had to cling to. They no longer had the luxury of waiting for more eastern forces to arrive. They needed to stop the Razor-Edge Model before it wiped out too much of the city.

Unfortunately, the Razor-Edge Model didn’t have a windshield, so sniping the manipulator was out of the question. Its cockpit rested entirely inside the Exelia’s armor module, which was thick enough to deflect any Bullet Magic.

That was why Air said they had to get closer to the unit. They had no hope of beating the Razor-Edge Model with the information on hand, so their only choice was to investigate it directly and discover a weakness, risks be damned.

A weak point…

Did it have one, though? If it did, Rain had to find it at all costs. Otherwise, thousands of innocents would lose their lives.

Air predicted the enemy’s route and managed to close in on the Razor-Edge Model. It moved at immense speeds, but it was occupied with wreaking havoc in the streets. Thanks to that, Air’s superior driving skills allowed them to rapidly close the distance.

Eventually, they got within three hundred feet of the Razor-Edge Model. Air remained slightly behind it by driving along a parallel road, and Rain took that opportunity to observe the unit more closely. However, powerful flames suddenly billowed up around them from something other than their enemy.

That's… Rain looked ahead…and his gaze fell on five eastern cadets who'd probably been strolling around town before the fighting broke out. They'd reacted to the catastrophe by getting to the rooftops and firing Bullet Magic at enemy Exelias.

Unfortunately, most of their shots hit the Razor-Edge Model, which stampeded forward as the vanguard.

Tch…

Flames powerful enough to melt iron flared up, but they did nothing to curb the black unit's speed. Shortly after that, the ten western Exelias following it started mercilessly mowing down the cadets on the roofs. All five of them evaporated outright, not even leaving behind any flesh or blood spatter.

A single second was all those cadets' lives managed to buy. But in that moment, the radiant heat of the flames had illuminated something…and Rain caught sight of it.

"Wait, that's…"

"What is it, Rain?"

"I just got a look at its exterior."

The flash from the Bullet Magic gave him a clear view of the Razor-Edge Model's entire form. Rain had seen it before several times already, of course, but this was the first time he'd seen it up close so clearly. Its exterior was colored black, so it just looked like a giant hunk of metal under most circumstances. But the five cadets' attack made something clear to Rain…

The Razor-Edge Model had a mostly streamlined form. It couldn't fire any weapons of its own, so it relied on a simple charging attack that doubled as a defensive measure. As such, it brushed off most attacks. And in order to optimize it, the machine was smooth…with the exception of two sharp sections.

One of those sections was located on the frontmost part of the unit—its nose, essentially. It was the part that came into contact with objects that the Exelia rammed, so the sharpness made sense. The other, however, was an oddly uneven section of its armor located directly opposite the first one. In other words, its rear.

Rain wondered why he recognized the sight when an image flashed in his mind.

A submarine.

A weapon made for deep underwater operations. Those often had black, streamlined designs. And upon looking at the Razor-Edge Model with that in mind, Rain realized its structure was effectively identical to a submarine's.

The West had almost certainly used a submarine for inspiration. The Razor-Edge Model was the first second-generation Exelia Kreis Falman had developed, but Harborant hadn't had the time to craft a frame suitable for combat after stealing it, so they'd simply copied a submarine's plating.

No way…

The Razor-Edge Model, a black frame streamlined for charging attacks, had one unnatural bulge on its smooth body that served as a weakness…

I know exactly what to do!

With all that information, Rain easily cooked up a plan.

"That's the hatch."

"…What?"

"The hatch. It's a door that flips upward in submarines."

"Uh…," Air mumbled, not quite understanding what he meant. She was probably confused because submarines were a fairly recent invention.

"A hatch is a submarine's entrance. It's a thick door that's kept airtight to ensure water doesn't leak into the vessel. And get this—they have handles on the outside to help crew members get in."

Since they were underwater vessels, submarines weren't designed to keep intruders from infiltrating it. And the Razor-Edge Model seemed to share that unique attribute.

"If I open that hatch, I can drag the manipulator right out of their seat."

"But how?"

"I'll jump onto it and open it directly."

A long silence followed. Rain could only see Air's back, but she seemed stunned by his suggestion, which made him realize just how absurd his idea sounded. Even if he somehow managed to make the jump, the moment the enemy manipulator realized what he was doing, they'd shake him off. And being thrown off at that velocity meant instant death.

Rain had to get onto the unit without being noticed, which seemed comical.

"…I'll do what I can to back you up. You handle the rest," Air muttered and changed course. She realized they didn't have a better way to stop such a powerful opponent.

Air quickly closed the distance, driving right on its tail. Rain couldn't tell if the manipulator realized they were tracking it, but if they did, they weren't doing anything to stop them. Perhaps they thought a single enemy Exelia couldn't achieve much.

After a moment, Air accelerated once more to get their machine parallel with it.

…I can make it!

Rain jumped across to the Razor-Edge Model. The moment his legs left their Exelia, a blast of wind threatened to blow him away, but he quickly closed his fingers around the hatch and grabbed on tight, successfully landing on the Razor-Edge Model.

I did it!

Holding on to the Exelia's outer surface, he started working on opening the hatch, which was located exactly where he'd surmised. Using the butt of his rifle as leverage to rotate the handle, he opened the hatch with surprising ease.

However, as the hatch opened, Rain's hands stopped. Instead of the manipulator's seat, he unexpectedly came face-to-face with a room full of supplies. Apparently, the entrance for the crew was located elsewhere.

"Still, this is more than enough," Rain said while pointing his muzzle at the Exelia's interior. "I'm gonna blow the Razor-Edge Model sky-high!"

He fired at once, and the next moment, his Bullet Magic expanded within the unit's internal mechanisms. The Exelia's insides weren't strong enough to withstand the blast, resulting in a massive explosion that enveloped the whole unit.

True, the Razor-Edge Model was tough and bulky enough to shrug off almost any attack, but that only applied to its armor. Its internals, on the other hand, were just as susceptible to damage as any other armored vehicle.

I…did it…

Crimson flames spread out before Rain's very eyes. And they didn't just stop at the storage compartment, either. One by one, the Razor-Edge Model's armor modules flew off due to the internal blow. Its plating, which once seemed like impenetrable monoliths, broke into pieces that flaked off one after another.

Eventually, the chain explosion blew off the unit's right-side armor modules entirely, exposing its innards, including the well-armored cockpit.

And that gave Rain a clear view of the manipulator's back.

Okay… I can kill them!

The destruction hadn't extended to the engine, which meant the Razor-Edge Model still had the ability to move. However, that would all end once Rain took the manipulator's life.

Unfortunately, his target tilted the unit at that exact moment. They'd likely done it out of confusion, but it still jolted Rain upward. He felt like a flea crawling atop a rampaging cat's back. His grip on the fuselage failed, and he was flung away, but even so…

I can do this!

…Rain aimed his rifle at a downward angle while he was still in midair. It was risky, but a shot from above would certainly catch the enemy manipulator off guard. He still couldn't see them clearly through the smoke and fire, but there was no chance of him missing at such close range.

Gravity grabbed hold of him and pulled him down, giving him a clear view of his enemy…and as a result, he hesitated.

The Razor-Edge Model's manipulator was Athly.

"Ah…!"

His mind went completely blank. Rain knew he had to stop the mass murderer behind the wheel, but he'd never expected it to be the girl who'd

left him a few days ago. And that created a fatal delay. Rain fired off his round a moment too late, so the bullet that should have pierced her head skimmed her right eye, tearing into Athly's lovely face. Blood scattered into her hair…and the shot blew off her right eyeball.

"Aaah, ugh!" Athly cried out in pain, but she hadn't suffered a fatal wound. Her eye had been blown clean off, yet she didn't falter. She moved with purpose, and the next moment, an intense shock wave ran through Rain's body.

"Gah, aaaaaah!"

The Razor-Edge Model's front leg slammed into Rain's abdomen. Athly had mercilessly swatted her old friend out of the air. That iron limb was so heavy that it bounced Rain against the ground like a ball before he slammed into a wall.

"Ngh, aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

No injury he'd sustained thus far compared with the excruciating pain he felt. He wouldn't have been surprised if all the bones in his body had just broken.

Rain's field of vision swam, contorted, and turned red. He honestly couldn't tell if it was caused by the bleeding in his head or from his legs.

"Aaah…"

His consciousness started to fade. An intense wave of drowsiness crept over his mind like a cloud of death. But even as he felt his life ebbing away, Rain heard an Exelia screech to a halt before him. And a second later, it scooped him up.

He didn't even need to look to know who it was. Athly had collected his body by maneuvering the front legs to tow Rain to her. And then she'd wrapped her slender arms around him in an embrace.

"Y-you…," Rain coughed out. "Do you know…how many people you… killed back there?"

"Yeah," Athly breathed out.

"Why…did you?"

"Ghosts."

"Ah…!"

"You know about them, too, don't you?" she asked as she took hold of Rain's pistol. "They're dead mages who've been revived that use their powers to aggravate the war. And one of them is that girl you're protecting. Air."

Athly then pulled the silver bullets out of his gun's chamber and continued. "I know, Rain. I know what you two have been doing with these bullets. How many people you've erased, how many battlefields you've changed, how many lives you've ended. And I also know my parents and my hometown burned because of your actions."

"So that's…why…"

That's why you tried to kill me? That's why you betrayed your own country and defected? That's why you killed so many innocent people? You

destroyed the lives of thousands of helpless people just to enact your revenge against me?!

"You idiot…!" Rain's body filled with enough anger to make him forget his fatal injuries. "If you hate me that much, you should've just killed me! Why…? Why do all this?!"

"Hate you? Kill you? No, Rain, you've got it all wrong," Athly said as she reactivated the Razor-Edge Model. "I'm here to protect you."

"…Huh?"

“I’ll protect you from that girl…the silver Ghost, Air Arland Noah.”

What is she saying…?

Rain wasn’t following. They’d spent years together, so he thought he knew his friend, but all of a sudden Athly felt like an inhuman monster who was incapable of speech.

“You’re all I have left, Rain,” Athly declared. And as she spoke, she continued riding through the city, reaching top speed within seconds. “My parents are dead…and my hometown is gone, but I can keep fighting as long as you’re by my side. I’ll keep you alive in this world of fire and blood. I won’t let that Ghost do as she pleases.”

No…, Rain wanted to say, but that word failed to leave his lips. He wanted to tell her he fought of his own will, but the words caught in his throat.

An Exelia suddenly lunged toward the Razor-Edge Model.

“Rain!”

Air had been right beside them the entire time. And realizing Rain had gotten captured, she’d swerved her unit around to save him. She’d cut ahead of Athly, driving straight at her. It would have been a head-on collision, but at the last moment, she’d forced her Exelia into a jump.

“Take my hand!” Air shouted while leaning forward from her seat and reaching her hand out to Rain. She wanted to snatch him away as she jumped over them, but…

“I won’t let you!”

…Athly blocked Rain’s extended hand. Both their hands cut through empty air, grasping nothing. Air’s unit sailed by, forming a vast gap between the two Exelias. And with that, Rain’s one-in-a-million chance of escaping disappeared.

“I’ll see you soon, Ghost Air. You may have gotten away from me this time, but next time we meet…I’ll wipe you out of existence. Count on it.”

And the Razor-Edge Model sped away, exiting the battlefield at a speed no M4 could ever match. Despite its missing armor, the giant unit was near unstoppable once it reached maximum velocity.

Dammit!

Rain’s injuries rendered him immobile, so he remained helpless and still as Athly carried him away. He’d failed in the most spectacular fashion possible. And as his consciousness faded, he felt an emotion swirl in his heart.

I…

Regret. He regretted that moment of hesitation more than anything else in his life. He’d wavered and shot at her a moment too late, and so he’d lost his only chance to turn the battle around. He’d missed the best opportunity to destroy the Razor-Edge Model, thereby dooming thousands of innocents.

He’d utterly failed to kill Athly, failed to bring her to justice for her crimes.

He'd been resolved to kill her before. When he'd decided to report her desertion, he'd mentally prepared to shoot her the next time they met, which meant he'd recognized her as an enemy. But had he really understood?

The moment he saw her face, Rain's hand had stopped. That pause didn't last for even a second, but he'd definitely wavered. Even after witnessing how many lives she'd taken, he'd refused to think of her as the enemy.

His heart was weak enough to falter, even if ever so slightly. Why did he decide not to shoot Athly? His fatal error had led to a disastrous, irreparable outcome and a sense of regret that overwhelmed all his other emotions.

"Don't worry, Rain," Athly said.

"…Huh?"

"We have the Devil's Bullet. If we use it to change this world, we can make it so this tragedy never happened. All the people who died here, this whole city, they'll all be back once we shift the world."

When she said those words, Athly's eye was completely free of all lies and deceit. She truly believed that she could fix everything. Unfortunately, Rain knew better.

The Devil's Bullet wasn't all-powerful. If anything, it was a total wild card. And in most cases, it produced completely unpredictable results. Rain didn't know if someone had told her about the Devil's Bullet or if she'd just come to that conclusion on her own, but she definitely had the facts all wrong.

Athly had destroyed the capital under the impression that everything could be restored, but Rain knew that was impossible.

You're wrong, Athly. You can't do it.

The power contained within those silver bullets was nowhere near that convenient. Rain knew—he could just tell—that this battlefield could never be undone. He had little more than intuition to go on, but having used the Devil's Bullet as many times as he had, he simply knew.

There was no taking back this tragedy.

No…perhaps there was one way to change things…

I…

There was one person he had to shoot, one person whose existence made a difference, the now one-eyed girl embracing him. He had to erase Athly.

Can I…do that? No…I have to…

His vision blurred, but even so, Rain steeled his resolve. And at the same time, he felt an awful realization dawn upon him.

I have to kill Athly… I have to wipe out her existence entirely!

As such thoughts ran through his mind, the massive black goliath disappeared from the capital, leaving the crushed, burning remains of its many victims in its wake…

AFTERWORD

This series is the sixth I've written, including those that have never seen the light of day. Honestly, that's probably a lot less than you'd expect, but come to think of it, there were many I gave up halfway through. Plus, in some cases, I rewrote one work over three times only to end up shelving it. As such, quite a few of my books were invisible, in a way.

It's said that addition is always better than subtraction. And to borrow a quote from *The Little Prince*: "What is essential is invisible to the eye."

That quote is a good segue into this series, since my concept has Rain and Air acting in ways that are invisible to the eye. They never leave their mark on history, and no one knows of their efforts. No matter what they achieve, no one praises them, nor do they expect any such reward. And yet, they still act in the service of their sense of justice.

That's a hard path to travel. But even people like them, who always remain behind the curtain of history, have something only they can do, be it an achievement for the better…or for worse.

Athly is a good example of that. She's a truly kind girl who tries her hardest, but fate was cruel to her and sent her on a darker path. And I find that things like that happen often, really. If people always knew the right answers ahead of time, we would never live to know regret, but that just isn't possible.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed Volume 3. Athly, who's been acting in the shadows since the end of Volume 1, has finally started making her move, which leaves me personally satisfied. I think she did what she truly wanted, so even if the end result was rather tragic, I'd personally like to at least give her a consolation prize for all her hard work.

On the protagonists' front, Rain and Air were much more passive this time around. They got tossed around by the turbulent situation, but I personally think they still largely did what they wanted to. In fact, everyone truly and honestly did their best.

I'd like to thank everyone who was involved in the creation of this book as well as all the readers. I've truly gotten a great deal of help from a lot of people. You were a great source of strength to me, especially when I couldn't tell those around me that I was writing novels. I hope I can become a person worthy of interacting with you. And when that time comes, I hope we truly get along.

Well, until we meet again.

It's been an honor.

Kei Uekawa

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